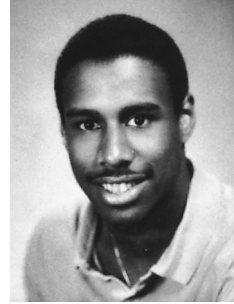


## GERALD J. BARON

SB 1985 (mechanical engineering) MIT; several posts with Rabbit Software, 1985-1991, including portation specialist, development engineer, technical support manager, domestic sales engineer, and marketing manager; sales manager, Computone Corp., 1991-1993; from sales manager to regional director, S2 Systems Inc., 1993-1996; vice president for Eastern Regional Sales, 1996, Worldwide Professional Services, 1996-1997, Americas Professional Services, 1997-1998, and North American Sales and Professional Services, S2 Systems, 1998- ; board member, World Fellowship Christian Center.

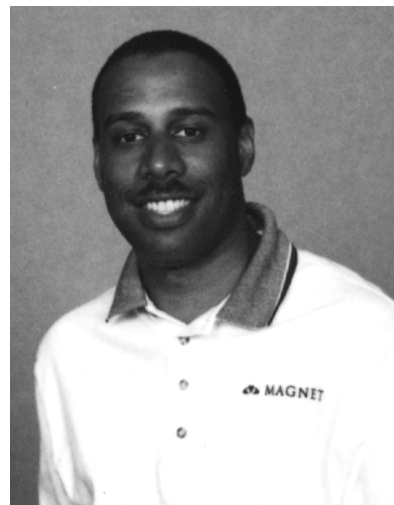


I was born in New York City in Brooklyn, but I grew up in Queens. I spent most of my life in Queens. Both of my parents are Haitian immigrants who came from Haiti early in their lives. I think they were both about nineteen or twenty when they came over. My father came to the United States, joined the Air Force, and traveled the world with the Air Force. When he got out of the Air Force, he joined AT&T and went through their management training. He ended up being a management consultant internally within AT&T. He retired in 1985 and went into business for himself as an import/export entrepreneur. My mother left Haiti and went to Canada and studied to be a nurse. She specialized in operating room techniques. When she moved to New York, she worked in one hospital in the operating room, and eventually became the head nurse in the operating room. She retired a few years ago and now she works part-time. And I have one brother that I grew up with.

I'd say the thing that I remember most in my childhood and growing up was the way my father always put so much pressure on me to excel when I was young. Examples of that would be that whenever I had to do my homework, for him it was never enough that the content was correct. He would always get on me about the presentation. Was the handwriting neat? Was the paper neat? Was everything well laid out? He kept pressing me. I would ask him, "Why is it that you just keep pushing me? I have what they asked me to do." He always made a point of saying that it wasn't enough to just do what I was asked to do, that I

should always strive to do more than I'm asked to do because that always leaves an impression with people and gives people the sense of quality and excellence.

He also was someone who pushed me a lot towards leadership, and would often challenge me to take on leadership roles. When I was in high school in New York, "block associations" were becoming popular. Every block would get together. They would have activities—clean the block up, and hold block parties and things like that. The kids on my block complained that the block parties that the adults threw were not any fun. I would tell my father. He, for a while, was the president of the block association. Finally he said, "I'm tired of hearing you complain about it. Why don't you do something about it?" So he helped me write some letters to all the children on the



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street and we formed our own junior block association. I don't know if anybody else ever did that, but we created a block association involving the kids on our street. We had our own events. We had car washes and bake sales and eventually funded, by ourselves, a trip to Hershey Park in Pennsylvania.

So my father always pushed me to excel—do more, take leadership. He had this belief that because God had gifted me with intelligence and being able to be articulate, I had a responsibility to do something with that. I had a responsibility to be a leader. I couldn't just sit back and watch what was going on. I had to be involved. It was an obligation. There was no choice about that. I fought against that for a long time. His influence was so strong that, as I started to take on leadership roles, I began to realize—yes, leadership is an obligation. That has been very formative in that, as I've gone through both college and my career, I sought opportunities to make a difference and to influence people's lives or influence the environment for the better. It's similar to the Boy Scouts' attitude—I want to leave a person or situation better off than it was when I got there.

Those were some of the highlights. My parents were both very good at exposing my family to different things. They took us to the theater and they took us to the symphony and they took us traveling around the country.

*This was when?*

When we were in New York, growing up.

*In high school?*

In high school and even before that. We were constantly visiting different places and doing different things. That helped a lot. The exposure helped me to realize that there was more to life than what I saw on my street and in my neighborhood.

*No question. Being out of New York, there was so much to be exposed to if one were taken to all these things. You couldn't be in a better place.*

That's right. They really did expose us. It's funny. Looking back, as a child, some of these things I fought against. When they would take us to the museum, all I could think of was, "Oh, man, we're going to be walking for hours all day." But now, I'm glad. I'm glad that I got to see the things that I got to see. Some of those things that I did growing up eventually influenced the fact that I enjoy history and love to travel around the world and

learn the history of the places that I go. I think it's because of the things that my parents allowed me to taste and see, so to speak.

*Is your brother younger or older?*

I have a brother two years younger. We grew up together and we're very close.

*Tell me a little bit about how you found out about MIT and how you actually got there.*

Well, it was interesting. When I was growing up, my family visited Boston. It was the first time I ever visited Boston. The family that we visited with took us over to Harvard. I saw the ivy-covered walls and went through the Coop. I had heard of Harvard and was really fascinated by Harvard. I told my dad, "When I grow up, I'm going to go to Harvard." I just left it at that. I guess I was seven or eight years old.

When it came time to apply for college, I made a point for myself that I wanted to apply to every single Ivy League school, because I wanted to prove to myself that I could get into the Ivy League schools. I was very cocky. I knew I could do it and I did apply to every one of them. I spent a lot of money. I applied to every single Ivy League school, all six or seven of them. But I didn't apply to MIT. I didn't know anything about MIT.

One day my father was talking to me. At that time, I wanted to be an architect. I loved drawing. I loved spatial things and composition. My dad, knowing better than I did, asked me questions—"Why do you want to be an architect? What do you know about architecture? Do you know any famous architects or famous buildings?" Of course, the answer was no to most of those questions. Then he said, "Well, I've noticed certainly through your grades that you're very good in math and in science." I said, "Yes." He asked me, "Well, do you like it?" I said, "Sure." He said, "Well, since you're so good in math and science, I think you really should take a crack at applying to MIT." I said, "Okay, fine. I'll apply." I still had no concept of what MIT was. I didn't know anything about it.

So I applied to MIT—one more application, no big deal, again feeling very confident that I would get in. Then one day I was talking to my French teacher, and I told him that I was applying to MIT. He told me, "You'll never get in. You'll never get into that school. There's so much competition, you'll never get in." That was the spark that really made me want to get accepted by MIT.

When my father suggested MIT, I agreed to please him. I had no desire on my own. But when this teacher told me that I couldn't get in, then I said, "Well, I'll show you." Two of us from my high school applied to MIT. I got in and he didn't. The teacher was sure that the other guy was going to get in and that I wasn't.

So when I got to MIT, I still had no clue what kind of caliber a school it was—what it was about. I didn't know its reputation. Initially, it was very intimidating because I met all these people who knew about MIT since they were little kids, they knew what they were going to study, they knew why they were there, they knew professors, they knew all these things about MIT. I didn't know anything about MIT. So it was very, very intimidating when I started out. After a while, as I read magazines or listened to the news and I would hear MIT's name come up, it started to dawn on me what kind of a college I was attending.

It probably took me two years before I really understood. One event put my MIT education in perspective, in the summer of my sophomore year, after I went to Goodyear the second time for Second Summer. That Second Summer, I decided to go to the University of Akron. One day while I was walking back from class, I was wearing my MIT shirt and a guy stopped me on the street and exclaimed, "Wow! Do you go to MIT?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Oh, man. I would do anything in the world to go to MIT." He just started going on and on about all the opportunities and what was possible as an MIT student. That conversation made me realize more than anything else what I had in front of me, what was available, and that I was wasting my opportunity at MIT by trying to do all the wrong things, by trying to be popular and hanging out and all those other things, and that the best thing I could do was focus on taking advantage of every minute that I was at MIT.

That was the turning point in my college career. After sophomore year, everything went so much better. My grades got better. I became very focused and I knew what to do, what not to do. It made all the difference in the world for me. It was interesting.

*It brings up another point, too. How did you choose your field and career?*

When I first got to MIT, I didn't know what I wanted to do but a lot of my friends did. The field that I first chose was mechanical engineering. I

liked physics and math, and I figured that mechanical engineering was a field in which I could use those skills and be successful. I also sensed that mechanical engineering laid a foundation that would allow me to go in any direction that I wanted to. It wasn't as specialized as other engineering disciplines such as aerospace engineering, nuclear engineering, chemical engineering, or even electrical engineering. I got a work-study job as a programmer, and fell in love with programming. This led me to decide that I really didn't want to do mechanical engineering.

The other event that reinforced my choice not to pursue a career in mechanical engineering were my two summers at Goodyear. I had a feeling that some of the mechanical engineers I met there had reached a plateau. They had been doing the same thing for years and I didn't want that to happen to me. That seemed so boring. When I got exposed to programming and fell in love with it, I thought, "Wow, here's a field that will constantly change and in which there will always be something exciting to do. I want to go into programming."

That's when I switched majors from Course II, and I moved to II-A so that I could start taking some computer science classes. I stayed in computer science. Through some of the work that I did with the Office of Minority Education and Project Interphase, I got hooked up with the director of the Career Office. He made an exception for me to allow me to have interviews with companies that were looking for people in computer science, even though I wasn't in Course VI. Through that, I got my first job, as a programmer at Rabbit Software.

That's how it all started. I started out as a programmer. As a result of the Goodyear experience, I decided I didn't want to work for a big company. All three of the companies I've worked for have been very small and have given me a lot of opportunities to get involved in many areas. I started out as a programmer, and in 1988, I got the opportunity to go to Paris. I started out doing technical support, and then ultimately took over the department and managed technical support for all of our distributors in Europe and in Africa. I made sure that the products were working and helped distributors out in any way I could.

In 1990 Rabbit closed the Paris office, so I moved back and got involved in supporting salespeople by going out on sales calls and answering

the technical questions. That gave me a love for selling. I also did a short stint in marketing and decided that I really wanted to get into sales. So in 1991, I moved to Atlanta to take a job as a salesperson in charge of the European distributors.

*Same company, though?*

It was a different company. I changed companies in '91. I worked there for two years and then decided that I wanted to get out of distribution sales, selling through people to the end user, and start selling to major corporations directly, which is when I joined my present company, in 1993. I started out as a salesperson. I got my first sale in nine months. The next two years, I exceeded my quota by more than 125 percent and went to what they call Winner's Circle. Then in 1996, I was given the opportunity to be a sales manager and have some people report directly to me. I did that for three months, and then I was promoted to vice president of sales for half of the country. I did that for two months and then was asked to take over what we call our professional services department. That's the department that actually installs the software and makes any enhancements or customizations. I managed that department and customer support until February 1998, when I also took on sales.

So now I'm currently responsible for all of North America, which represents two-thirds of the company's overall revenues. So it's really my responsibility to bring in the bulk of the company's money.

*Tell me a little bit more about what your company does, the products and the personnel that you have reporting to you. And what does your job entail in terms of what you have to do on a daily basis?*

At S2 Systems, what we specialize in is providing two types of software. One is called authorization software. It's the type of software that's used, for instance, when you go to use a credit card and they swipe it through the point-of-sale device. The action of running the card through the device creates a message that has the cardholder's name, credit card number, expiration date, store ID, device ID, and amount of purchase. That message is sent over a phone line through a network to our software. Our software takes that message and decodes it. If it is a VISA transaction, for example, we'll recognize it and send it over to VISA. VISA will decide whether or not they approve it and send out

authorization or a decline message back to our software.

There are millions of these messages flowing through our software at the same time. Our software takes the response, matches it up with the authorization request, and sends it back to the device. That's when the buyer gets an approval code. Our software authorizes credit cards and ATM cards. If you've seen Kroger supermarkets here in Atlanta, when you pay by check, our software authorizes those transactions. Our software is being used by American Express, VISA, and MasterCard, as well as five of the top six third-party processors—companies that offer the authorization service to stores that are too small to do it on their own. We estimate that probably twenty percent of the electronic transactions that are handled in this country are handled by our software in one form or another.

We also have six of the top ten pharmacy chains—including Eckerds, Rite-Aid, CVS, and Kroger as customers. They all use our software for pharmacy authorization. When you go to these pharmacies and give them your insurance card, they will send a transaction to see if Clarence Williams is eligible and if he is still on an insurance plan. Our software processes that transaction to determine whether you're eligible.

We also have software that manages claims. One of the big issues for insurance companies is electronically processing medical claims from the doctors' offices, because the processing goes faster and costs less. We have 17 of the 62 Blue Cross/Blue Shield plans using our software to do health care transaction processing. Massachusetts Blue Cross/Blue Shield use our software to electronically process managed care. Essentially, if you're part of an HMO, you have to go to your primary care physician before you can go see any specialist. Let's say you needed to go see somebody for a urology screening—under a managed care plan, you have to go to your primary care physician and then they will refer you to a urologist. If it's a urologist who is in the network, it costs you nothing. But if you want to go to a urologist who is not a part of the network, it will probably cost you a lot. We have software that manages all of that electronically, so that the doctor can make the right decision and the insurance company can control their costs.

So we're very key to a lot of what happens electronically in the United States. We also have

another type of software that's called middleware software, which provides communications that allows our customers to tie different systems together. The SABRE network that American Airlines has for all their travel reservations, for communicating to car rental agencies, to hotels, to other airlines, is run using our software. We take messages from the different systems and make sure that they go to the right place and that the network never goes down. We have stock exchanges that run on our software—Philadelphia Stock Exchange and Vancouver Stock Exchange. We have brokerage firms—Waterhouse Securities and Olde Discount Brokers. Other large customers are Aetna US Health Care, which is one of the largest insurance companies, and Cigna.

We deal with blue-chip, high-profile companies. We have as customers the largest grocery chain, Kroger, and the largest pharmacy chain, Rite-Aid. I'm responsible for the North American territory, which is Canada and all of the United States. I have a sales force that goes out and sells the software to our customers.

*Does that include the hardware as well?*

We don't sell the hardware. We just sell the software. I have fifteen salespeople, four sales support people, three administrators. I have a marketing group of about five people, and they all collectively are involved in going out there, finding customers, and selling our software to the customers. I have a professional services organization which numbers about fifty people. Once the software is sold, they're responsible for understanding exactly how the customer wants it configured, how they want it installed, and what their environment is. They will implement the software, do all of the testing, the certification to make sure that it runs the way it's supposed to, and sometimes will be involved in the rollout, which is to implement it around the country with our customers.

*What kind of background do they have to have?*

Our folks are all technical people. They have computer science backgrounds. They're just like consultants would be at a Booz Allen or somewhere else—that same level of business and technical consulting. I have a customer support department of about twelve people whose job is to take in calls. Different parts of the help desk will take in calls. They're available 24/7. They'll usually be in the office for the regular business hours and then

they're on call after hours. They all have laptops and cell phones. Because of the nature of the software, if there's a problem, they have to immediately be available to help the customer. They will stay as long as they need to. They'll get people from around the company involved in solving the problem.

We have what we call sustaining engineering, which is a group of folks who will actually be involved in fixing. The help desk will identify and diagnose. Then the sustaining engineering group will fix the problems and make sure that everything works well. Then I have one person who does training for me. So I have a pretty broad organization and, as I said, I'm responsible for two-thirds of the company's overall revenues.

*How much money are you talking about?*

This year we're going to do 22 million dollars total revenue in North America. Next year we're projecting to do 25 million dollars. It's a substantial chunk of the company. On a 36 million dollar company, the bulk of it is based on what I do. Now, my responsibilities are to make sure, number one, that all of my departments are functioning the way they're supposed to. My best department right now is my professional services organization, because it was my first focus. We have management metrics that we've established and look at on a monthly basis to make sure that the operation is working well. We look at our profitability. We look at utilization, which is how much our people are billable. We look at realization, which is how much money we actually get based on the amount of work that we do. We look at our capacity, which is how much work should we be able to do based on the number of people we have and compare that to how much revenue we actually generate.

We look at all these different metrics to make sure that we're operating well. We're starting to build that up on the sales side to make sure that our salespeople are being very productive and doing the right things. I've gotten to a level now, as an executive, that I don't do the day-to-day work. A lot of my job is to be an evangelist for the company, to be a leader and give people vision. I spend a lot of my time one-on-one or talking to groups. I make presentations to either the whole company or parts of the company. If people are unsettled or they're not sure or they don't know what to do or we've just gone through a change and they need to understand the change, I spend

my time being the spokesperson to paint a picture for them of the opportunity, explain why we have to do what we're doing, and why it's important.

So I do a lot of internal selling. I do a lot of work with our customers—listening to the customers, trying to understand what they think we're doing well, what they think we're doing poorly, and what they'd like to see us change. I take that feedback, bring it internally, and try to influence the company. If it's a department that I control, then I'll start setting new policies. If it's another department, then I work with others to figure out what we should do. The other aspect is working with the president of the company, whom I report to directly, or with the vice president of international sales. We take a look at our business and decide, "What are we going to do? Are we going to start focusing a little bit differently? What do we need to do to keep this company growing, to make it vibrant?" We have a lot of interactions to talk about those types of issues.

*So actually, it's about four people who really run the company?*

Three. There's a president and two vice presidents who run the company. We are looking for some more people. We're looking for a vice president of engineering, a CFO, and a vice president of marketing. Because the company has been through so much change, we lost our CFO, we lost the person who was VP of sales before me, we lost the person who was VP of marketing. It has been difficult to recover until now. Now that we're going to be independent of Stratus, the opportunity that we can provide someone who comes into the company is far greater and far brighter than it was before. So that will help us to have some other people there to bounce ideas off of and not make it just three people responsible.

*You have about as major a responsibility for an organization that I have seen, of all the people that I've talked to. It's like you are hands-on in terms of the moving of the company. It's a little different from some of the other folks who are in good positions, but they are not actually leaders.*

Or involved in the direction.

*Exactly. Given that that's the situation, when you think about what you are involved in—motivating, leading—where do you think MIT has been most helpful to you, when you look back and see what you gained, and what you are actually doing now?*

I'd say one of the first things that MIT has helped me with is confidence. There are a few things that I learned at MIT. One was that because I got through, I gained a confidence that I could deal with any situation that was thrown at me, any new challenge or opportunity. For instance, when I took professional services over in 1996, the company had just gone through a layoff. We had laid off a third of the company, and that particular department was not doing well. It was losing money to the tune of negative-16 percent profit margin. We were losing people constantly. Even after the layoff, I lost another thirty-one people in the organization between July and December. My MIT experience gave me the confidence to take on a situation in which a lot of people would say, "I don't want to be bothered with it. It's too hard, it's too difficult, I can't see my way through it and be successful." There was nothing in that situation that was any harder than what I went through at MIT.

The other thing that MIT helped me with is to realize my strengths and my weaknesses. Some of the things that I learned at MIT are: my strengths, weaknesses, my likes and dislikes, and an optimistic outlook. When I first got to MIT, I was so intimidated and wasn't really doing well and got frazzled in being surrounded by all these geniuses. There was a lot of psychological stuff that I had to deal with. I had grown up with a lot of my cousins. I didn't really have many friends outside of my biological family before attending MIT, so I had to deal with that at MIT. I had to deal with wanting to be accepted. But going through all of that, I finally came to realize what was important in life—that no matter what the situation was, I can find the bright side of it if I focus on it. It gave me a very positive outlook.

All of those things have really helped me in my career to look at situations. Where most people will shy away or are unwilling to take on the challenge, I raise my hand and say, "Give me that chance." To be, at thirty-six, driving 22 million dollars of a company that really is in the heart of a lot of what happens in America is exciting and significant.

MIT has also given me a tough skin. It took me five years to get out. I took a semester off. One of the things that I had realized as I was going through was that the most important thing was not that I got out in 1984 but that I got out, that

I did what I had to do to get out of the Institute and get out of it what I wanted to get out of it. It changed my time perspective from seeing that realizing the goal and the journey involved in realizing the goal were important, and that I shouldn't get caught up on realizing the goal within some time frame so much that I give up if it no longer becomes possible, or that I become despondent if it doesn't happen within the time frame.

The journey to get to the goal is so important. The satisfaction, when I persist to reach the goal, is also important. That's given me a very different time perspective, I believe, than a lot of other people. Where people will look at things and say, "Oh man, if I can't get it done in a year, it's not worth doing," I look at it and say, "The most important thing is that it gets done, because that's the right thing to do." Whatever time it takes, that's what I have to do. I think those things were very formative for me in my career.

*In connection with that, talk about some of the influential people who you think, when you look back on it, have been very helpful to you, starting from before you came to MIT as well.*

Before MIT, the most influential people would be my parents—my father most of all when it comes to things like career and leadership, and both of my parents and my extended family, aunts and uncles—just in terms of exposure, in terms of the sense of what's right and what's wrong. They instilled in me a sense of integrity, a sense of character, a sense of honor, and a sense of dignity.

The people at MIT who stick out most in my mind as having made a difference would, first, be you. While I was going through a lot of difficult times, you were always there to help me see the forest through the trees. Professor Wesley Harris had a different style. He tended to be hard-core and blunt. But in talking to him, he cut through all the nonsense. I didn't always like what he said, but I could respect his strength and I could respect his directness and he was right in a lot of the things that he'd say.

I'd say another person who really helped me was a student, Norman Fortenberry. Although we didn't spend a lot of time together, when I would talk to him, he was another person who would just cut straight to the chase and say, "Gerry, you're messing up when you're doing this or you're doing that. This is what you should be doing." That helped me a lot, to have people who cared enough

to tell me the truth and not try to sugarcoat it or blow me off.

Jim Hubbard was another person. I had known of what he had gone through as a student at MIT, and to see him as an MIT professor was an inspiration. I took one of his classes. He was such an exceptional teacher. I learned so much from his class and he was one of my favorite teachers. I admired him as someone who persisted to make his dream happen.

In terms of people I had a close connection with, those were the ones that leap out. There were others that I would talk to, like Dean John Turner, Dean Mary Hope, Dean Leo Osgood, Pearline Miller, and Gloria Payne in the Office of Minority Education. They were all part of my support structure. One of the things that I realized when I was at MIT is that it has an excellent support structure. It was hard for me as a freshman to get used to asking for help, because I was used to being at the top of my class and I didn't need help to succeed in my grades. At MIT you can't succeed without help and I didn't know how to deal with it. A key to my success was understanding that I didn't have to be right all the time and I didn't have to know all the answers. This led me to reach out to students, to reach out to faculty, to reach out to the administration for help and guidance and direction, asking—"Tell me, what do you think I should be doing, because I'm a little bit lost right now?"

There were a number of people who really helped, but some people were more consistent than others. It seemed that no matter what foolishness I might have been going through, they were still willing to listen and help me out and slap me upside the head to get me straight if I needed that. I thought that was great. I haven't really kept in touch that much with a lot of these people after I left, but they're still very close in my heart in terms of thinking how they helped me get through, especially my senior year.

Senior year was the hardest of all of them because I was so close to the end and I overburdened myself. I did a thesis, I took 6.170, which was one of the hardest courses, I was working, and I took this other class and ultimately didn't pass that class. It was very, very hard for me because I got A's in everything except one class. Fortunately, I had learned earlier on by talking to you and talking to Pearline that it was really important to reach out to a lot of the professors and administrators to

let them know what I was going through and what I was doing and the burden that I was under. And it really made a difference in the end, when the administration took a look at the load that I was under and my track record to say, “This is someone who really worked hard. We can understand what happened with this one class. He deserves to graduate.” That was a valuable lesson for me.

The other thing that I learned at MIT was that anything is possible if you really persist. When I switched to Course II-A, for example, in my junior year, I technically was not supposed to be able to switch so late in my curriculum. When I interviewed for computer science jobs, I was in Course II and only Course VI people were supposed to get those interviews. There were a lot of things that were barriers to most people that I would challenge. And guess what? I found a way to overcome those barriers. That built a lot of confidence so that, even if I don’t know how to make something happen through persistence and asking for help, the path to success will become clear to me.

*One of the things that you seem to be saying is that that’s one of the beauties of the place. There are rules, but yet and still, they’re very flexible to allow people to be aggressive, to take risks, so to speak.*

That’s right. What I found is that if you were willing to at least challenge or ask the question, there are people willing to support you. The sad thing when I consider some of my friends who continue to struggle, or who didn’t even make it through MIT, is that they weren’t willing to challenge the system. They weren’t willing to find a way. When I think about all the people I talk to who have done something that was out of the ordinary, it was because they were willing to try. It’s great to be in an environment where you can just keep trying and people don’t slap you down. They may not give it to you right away, but at least you know you have an opportunity—and if you try, you can make it.

*I couldn’t agree with you more. I’ve stayed there for twenty-six years and that’s how it is.*

There aren’t that many places like that.

*We need to also know about our weaknesses. If you had to talk about things that you would consider weaknesses in our institution, or things that were worst about your experience at MIT, what would you say about that?*

The things I found that tended to be weaknesses are not so much anything that MIT does. Maybe it’s something it doesn’t do. For one thing, when I first came in, there was this whole confusion, at least in my mind, of what Project Interphase was all about. For me, it was strange because I went to a very, very good high school and had taken a lot of advanced placement classes. If I had really understood where I was, I would have taken advantage of that and placed out of some classes and gotten through MIT a lot quicker.

The very first person I met on my way to MIT, someone who had gone through Project Interphase, described the experience. Growing up in New York, it was important for me to be accepted so I didn’t get beat up. After learning about Project Interphase, the thought that came to my mind was, “Wow, these are the cool people. These are all people who come from the kinds of neighborhoods that I’m used to in New York, so I want to be aligned with them and I want to be accepted by them and I want to be cool.”

Unfortunately, there is a misconception that only certain types of people go through Project Interphase. It’s not for those who are really doing well in high school, it’s for those who didn’t get exposed to physics or calculus. There was a separation of the Project Interphase versus non-Project Interphase people. The misconceptions about Project Interphase should be dealt with. I actually was one of the coordinators of Interphase the last year I was at MIT and found it to be a valuable program, but there’s a stigma that’s associated with the kids who go through it. If there’s some way to eliminate that stigma, that would be good. It’s not viewed as positively, for instance, as MITES. A kid who goes through MITES is viewed differently than somebody who goes through Project Interphase. Some of the majority students seem to assume that you couldn’t have gotten into MIT if you hadn’t gone through Project Interphase. And they start talking about reverse discrimination and affirmative action. No one gets into MIT easily. You have to earn your way in.

*Almost invariably, what I’ve found is that when I talk to all of you, you were tops. You did exceedingly well in high school among your peers. So we weren’t bringing in people who were incapable.*

Absolutely not. But there’s still a stigma about Project Interphase that has to be changed. I would say that it would be important to find a way to



help freshmen understand that it's okay to ask for help.

I remember my first experience was with Nels Armstrong. He goes through the “look to the right, look to the left”—what is it?—“one of the three of you isn't going to be here.” I heard that and it didn't really mean that much to me as a freshman. I was full of energy and thought, “That's not me.”

*You don't believe it.*

You don't. But I think somewhere through that orientation, it's really important to find a way to sell to the freshmen all the programs that are there to help—why it's important to use the dean's office, why it's important to use OME, why it's important to use BSU, why it's important to take advantage of what's out there. Maybe they should even have students come up and tell the horror stories of what happens when you don't ask for help.

Again, most of the students didn't need the help when they were in high school. They went through and succeeded without study groups or anything like that. They were tops in their class. If they can understand and learn the way to ask for help as a freshman, then it will make the rest of their MIT experience and their lives so much better. They can deal with anything else. It's very intimidating when you don't know that it's okay to ask for help. What it does for some of the kids is break down their confidence. If we could address those two things, that would make the experience much better for students.

*If you had to give advice based on your own experience—not only at MIT, but beyond in terms of your professional experiences as well—to other black students entering MIT, what would you tell them?*

First of all, seek help. Don't try to do it all on your own. Don't try to be the super-student who is going to try to get A's all by yourself. The school is not designed for that. In my opinion, I feel the volume of workload is deliberate, so that professors can see who some of their future graduate students will be. That's why they just pile the work on and on. You just can't do it on your own. Students have to learn how to ask for help—not only from the programs established by the administration or the tutorials by TA's, but it's as important to ask for help from other students.

I learned so much when we had study groups. I was in Black ME study groups. In my dif-

ferent classes, we would have study groups. We would sit down and try to help each other understand the homework or prepare for a test. One of us would get up and teach. It got to the point that we were teaching each other. If there was somebody in the group who particularly understood some concept, they would be the one to teach it to the rest of us. When I had opportunities to be the one to teach a concept to the rest, it really solidified my understanding. If they asked me questions, it would either show me that I really did know it or that I didn't know it. Then we would have to work at it some more.

So it's very, very important to get together with other students and not be intimidated that maybe they know a little bit more. What I realized is that there were some subjects I was very strong in and other subjects I wasn't very strong in. There were very few people who were strong across the board. Those people, I realized, were very talented. They may have been those people with very, very high IQ's. Well, that's okay. That's a gift that God gave them. I'm not going to feel bad about that because God didn't give me that gift. I'm not going to begrudge them or be intimidated by them. I praise God that they have that gift, but guess what? I don't have that gift. So what am I going to do? I'm going to try to pick their brains. I'm going to try to learn from them, try to understand what their thought process is.

That's another important point. The key to success at MIT for me is not completing the assignments, but understanding the thought process required to complete the assignments. That is the most important thing, finding out how a student or a professor or a TA was thinking when they came to an answer. If you understand that, then you have the key and then you can address any other problem.

That has become so important in my professional career. Where people are afraid to take on a challenge because they don't already know the answers, I know that all I need to do is figure out the process. I may not know the answer when I start it, but I will spend my time testing and trying and doing different things to start to understand the thought process. And at the same time I ask other people. I'll call people. I try to maintain a network of people who maybe have similar experiences or might know someone who does, and I'll just say, “Hey, do you know someone who can

explain to me how they do this part of their business or that part of their business?”

So learning to ask for help at MIT has helped me to advance in my career quickly. Again, I don't try to have all the answers. In fact, I realize that my success is dependent on the success of people around me and on leveraging other people's knowledge. In fact, I came to the conclusion at MIT that there is no need for me to learn a lesson the hard way if I can talk to someone else who has already been through it, and learn from them. Why bother? Why go through the pain? I don't need that kind of pain. I don't mind learning a lesson that no one else has learned before, but I'm not going to go through something someone else has already gone through. To me, it's not a mark of shame to ask someone else a question: "How do you deal with this?" In fact, with my company being sold, I'm calling about seven or eight different people to ask them, as a senior manager, what should I ask for? What should I look out for? How do I protect my own interests and my family's interests and all of that? I'm not going to go into it blindly or naively and end up getting taken advantage of. That's a key to success.

*I can't tell you how valuable those comments are. Can you imagine a student ten years from now looking at comments like that, at MIT or coming to MIT, what he or she can gain from that? We look back nearly thirty years now that I've been there, and basically MIT has not changed. You've been in and out. The process at MIT has been exactly what you have described here. And if you are able to do this, then others can too.*

That's the key. That's why I say, as painful as it was at times, I would go to MIT again and again and again, given the choice. My dilemma right now is trying to figure out whether or not I want to influence my daughter to go there. I want her to make her choice, but I believe so firmly in what that pressure-cooker type of environment can do in terms of building your confidence and guiding you that I would prefer not to have her miss out on a chance like that. It's not that you can't learn from other institutions, but there's something about being under pressure and the strength it builds. My analogy is it's just like steel that you put through the fire to forge it to make it stronger. That's what the MIT experience is like. It purges out impurities, it makes you learn who you are, but it makes you so much stronger.

So I struggle with what I would say to my daughter. Should I be overbearing and say, "That's where you're going to go"? I keep talking to her about it. I believe so strongly in the things that I'm saying.

When I first got out of school, for the first two or three years I was an associate admissions advisor. I would interview kids who were applying to MIT as an avenue to try to give them this advice. I've been active in the Big Brother program, again to try and influence someone. I'm active in One Hundred Black Men here in north metro Atlanta. I'm active in Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity. I do whatever I can to influence people through my activities and organizations and tell them about what I've been through.

*So you really have been very much involved in community services.*

As much as I can.

*As busy as you are.*

And I'm also involved in my church. I'm an elder now, just been promoted to assistant to the pastor. Again, it goes back to my father. It's the obligation. I've been blessed to get to go through a place like MIT. I've been blessed to be in the position that I'm in—financially and influentially and career-wise, so I feel very strongly that I have to do something with all of that. My philosophy is to influence as many young children as I can to show that there is life after college, that it's worthwhile to go to college, that it's not boring, that you don't have to become some square person because you went to college or went to a place like MIT. The doors that are open to you are so much greater than some other places or some other paths that you can take. I want them to see that. I don't think they see that enough. They see Michael Jordan, they see Michael Jackson, they see the drug dealer, they see all these other influences. But they don't see the influence of what happens when you go through the career path and they don't see that there is a lot of future, there's a lot of wealth opportunity, there's a lot of independence, there's a lot of reward that comes out of a good education.

So I want to be at least an example to influence kids to make them think seriously about going to college. Really, my challenge is not that they just go to college, but I want to challenge kids to go to a place like MIT, a place where it's not easy to get in, it's not easy to get through, and it's

not easy to get out. But that's the kind of challenge, that's the level that we should strive for.

There was a student—I can't remember his name, he was a Ph.D. candidate—and one day I asked him why he went for his Ph.D., because I was contemplating going for a Ph.D. What he told me was, "Gerry, you're in this mode of being radical and you're complaining about the system and you want to destroy it. What you have to understand, Gerry, is that if you want to change the system, it's really hard to do it from the outside. The way to change the system is to be on the inside of the system where you have the same credentials as everybody else, and then you have the influence from the inside."

That made such an impact on me. It led me to think, "You know what? I'm wasting my time doing protests. I need to get to a point where I can have some influence on people, where people can look at me and say, 'He's credible,' whether it's because of the degrees that I have or the things that I've done; 'He's someone worth listening to.'"

It's sort of amazing. I'm in the One Hundred Black Men, and there were some executives from companies like UPS and NCR and Equifax, companies much larger than the one I'm in. But the way they interact with me, in a way it makes me feel good because I'm so much younger than them, and they say, "Wow, here's a guy that's doing something." It surprises me sometimes. But I think it's because of the philosophy that I have, the confidence that I have, and the desire to want to give back. I want others to benefit.

*I know your father has to be extremely proud. I think he is. I'm sure he is.*

*In my opinion, you're one of our Michael Jordans, I can tell you that. You're certainly my Michael Jordan, let me put it that way.*  
Thank you.

*When I look through that whole group of those persons in that BAMIT list, you're certainly one of the persons who stand out. It shows that we're doing something that makes sense. I think it's very important that all of you really try to do what you're doing. We have an obligation to go back and pass that message on to the young bright black men and women, because they need us. If we don't do it, no one else will. That's why God put us on this earth.*

That's why he has given us the opportunities.

*I find that there are some of us who really are able to do this, get there, but we don't understand what that responsibility carries. It's clear to me that you understand it exceedingly well.*

Well, the way I look at it, would I be where I am if it weren't for people like Dr. Shirley Jackson and some of the things that she did to make an impact, or even Jim Hubbard or Dr. Jim Gates? These are all people who went through some tough times themselves at a time when there were a lot of people who really didn't want them at MIT, professors and students who really didn't want them at MIT. Why I appreciate those three, in particular, is that they have never, that I have seen, stopped wanting to come back and make some direct influence at MIT itself, as professors or on the MIT Corporation. That is significant.

That's not where I'm making my influence, but I want other people to know that they can make it through the Institute. I usually don't tell people that I went to MIT. Folks will either recognize the brass rat or they'll never know, because I won't tell them. If they're going to be influenced by me, I want them to be influenced by who I am and then MIT just happens to be a part of who I am. Too often people make a big deal and get caught up in the school.

*Is there any other topic or issue that comes to mind as you reflect on your own experience and on the experience of other blacks at MIT?*

Again, there is such a strong support structure at MIT. Sometimes it's undervalued by the students. The different aspects of the administrative support at MIT that I used—the Office of Minority Education and the programs that came out of it, being a coordinator for Project Interphase, being involved in Second Summer—were all things that helped me. I also benefited from some of the associations like Black ME, BSU and NSBE, and the Chocolate City living group. Some of the organizations like Black ME, BSEE for double-E's, the National Society of Black Engineers, all of these different organizations that are student organizations were great as a support structure.

Then there was the dean's office and the Admissions Office. My first two years, I worked in the Admissions Office. Being around Nels and the influence that he had on me, the opportunity to work in some of these offices, working in the dean's office, working in the Admissions Office,

working in OME—all of these things were great. BSU and the different things that the BSU had, the Tutorial Program, the buddy program—all of those things were fantastic. There was the opportunity to be involved in some of these programs and give back in some way, shape, or form. It was a tremendous opportunity to be involved and make a difference in someone else's life at a young age.

A program that was really good for me, although I don't believe that MIT does it anymore and I wish they would, was the alumni family program. I think it lasted maybe three or four years after I left. Before I even came up to MIT, they asked whether I wanted to have an alumni family sponsor me. The idea of the alumni family was to match me up with an alumnus who had been through the MIT experience and could provide some support. I signed up for it and got paired with a gentleman who I think graduated in the '50s, and his wife. They didn't have any children. They were like my family in Boston. They would take me to different events, take me out to dinner, and take me to the theater. The way the program worked, it was only supposed to be for my freshman year. But it worked so well, I was their first student in the program, that we stayed in contact throughout my years at MIT and still are in contact to the point that they came to my wedding and are even involved in my wife and daughter's lives as well. We're still very close with them and we visit them and we're trying to get them to visit us. It was a great program to have a person who had been through MIT who could be very supportive and helpful and say, "Here are some of the things to deal with." He wasn't even African-American, but it was great to have another person there.

Then the people—again, to go back to taking advantage of the people who are there. There are such wonderful people at MIT. If I could say anything, it's that anybody who is at MIT has such an opportunity and the worst thing they could do in their life is to waste that opportunity. I feel really sad for some of the folks I know who, for whatever reason, chose not to make it through. I think it's a choice. That's something that MIT taught me. Life is full of choices, and whatever you do is a choice that you make. The world doesn't do anything to you. God doesn't do anything to you. You make choices. I had to make some choices when I was at MIT. For as long as I fought making choices, I drifted. But as soon as I accepted the fact that I had

to make choices about my career, about my grades, about everything, I was in control of my life.

So that would be another thing that I would want to tell freshmen or anybody going to MIT. You have to make choices. You can't sit back and think that there's something wrong with the Institute because they don't make it easy for you. No, you have to choose your way through. You have to understand that there may be professors or students you run into who really don't think you belong there. Well, you make the choice how you deal with that. Some people react and say, "Well, it's not fair. I'm never going to get the grades that I want." Or you can choose to do what I did, which is, "I'm going to overcome it. If it's a professor who really isn't going to grade me the way that I think I should be graded, I'm not even going to waste my time fighting it because I know what I've learned and I know this isn't a stumbling block. This isn't going to stand in my way of getting where I want to go. It's their problem, not mine." It's all about the choices you make.

I say in closing that, for me, my MIT experience was one of the best things that ever happened in my life. Before getting married and before having a child, MIT was the best thing that happened to me. I would do it anytime and I recommend anybody to go to MIT. I'd say I'm sad that most people I talk to are unwilling to take on that challenge; they're unwilling to find out for themselves whether or not they can go through that kind of experience. I think that they miss out a lot. I think their rise in their careers or even in their personal lives just takes longer because they don't force themselves to go through the crucible and really learn who they are.

MIT is a very clear mirror, if you want to look at it that way. It can really tell you who you are and what you are and what you're all about. If you can look at that and learn from that, you can have some of what I've been able to have. It opens doors.

*I think you will prove to a number of the younger generations to come that there is certainly a different kind of Michael Jordan, and you've demonstrated that we need to have more of you.*