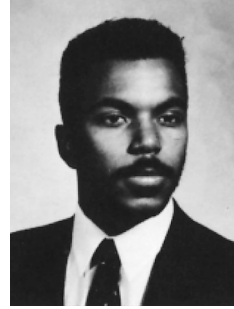


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I was born in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad on August 19, 1967. I was there for about three years until my parents moved my brother and me to New York City. We were living in Spanish Harlem for about a couple of months and then we moved to the northeast part of the Bronx in a very Italian neighborhood, an all-Italian immigrant neighborhood in the Bronx up by Pelham Bay Park.

My parents are both from Trinidad. My brother also was born in Trinidad. He is about ten years older than I am. Just as an aside, my father is of a more African persuasion and my mother is a more Caucasian persuasion. So even though they both identified themselves as Trinidadians, in America the issue of black and white became very evident. My parents specifically moved to the northeast part of the Bronx because at that time, this was in 1970, they were bringing us up and felt that they needed to be in a neighborhood that was much more conducive to raising kids.

My father was an engineer, in particular a draftsman doing engineering work. He worked for Ebasco Services doing nuclear designs. My mother worked in Presbyterian Hospital, where she has worked up to today.

She still works there?

She has been there over twenty-five years. I guess the first sort of work she did was data entry stuff around blood stats and all that type of stuff, data entry on tests in the lab. Now she does outpatient accounting work, billing and such. My father switched around to many different businesses, but he has primarily stayed in the same field. When he was in Trinidad, he primarily worked at the Texaco

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oil refinery, when Texaco was there. They actually moved to America in the hopes of—like I guess most immigrant families, particularly those from the Caribbean—only coming here for a short period of time, to amass a certain amount of wealth, to go back and live comfortably. My father, I think, had come up a year ahead or two years ahead of my mother. Then my mother came up and then we came up, so that's sort of the immigration aspect.

I was naturalized at sixteen. My parents finally decided, after being here for a while, that maybe we should get naturalized because it didn't seem like we were going back. But I spent all my summers, primarily all my summers, in the West Indies. Every summer I went back to the West Indies. Either it was Trinidad or St. Lucia, where my family lived. That was basically my upbringing. I always say to people that even though I grew up sort of in American school life and work life, my home life was very defined by West Indian culture—food-wise, music-wise, values-wise.

Have you pretty much maintained that, going back periodically to Trinidad?

I haven't been back recently. I've gone more to other islands. Barbados and Martinique are the other islands I have gone to since. I've always loved traveling, so I now go more to Europe and places like that and try to explore other cities.

But growing up, the most significant memories in my mind are that between the ages of three to five my parents had me enrolled in a Catholic school in Harlem that was right across from Harlem Hospital. That defined my formative years, I guess. It was a very good school. They used to teach us math and French at the age of three. You have to remember this is a school before you get

into first grade. My parents, I remember, used to get me up every morning at five or so and it was about an hour commute to get to Harlem. It was comprised of both train and buses to get to that area. I always remember my parents religiously doing that every morning to go to school.

I think that school had a lot to do with the formation of my education. They had trained us so well ahead of time. I mean, we were doing math at the age of three and four.

Right in the heart of Harlem, too. That's a very important point to make.

This is the early '70s. We're talking the music that defined the time. I also remember the science museum that used to be down close to the park. I remember that there would always be these days—I don't know if it was once a month, or once every semester or whatever—that we would always take these trips to the little science place and we would always go and interact with the science exhibits that were in there. It was just like buttons you push. It was very small, but it was in Harlem. I remember that that was one of my favorite places to go, as a trip that we always used to take. It wasn't far. It was just walking down the street about three blocks or whatever.

I remember the school was definitely mostly kids of color. It was run by nuns. I never remembered anything as far as bad experiences. I did fracture my leg on the merry-go-round, but I never remembered bullies. I didn't remember kids calling names. I didn't remember anything about that. I also don't remember defining myself as black or white, which was interesting.

The reason why I say that is because once I left that school, my brother went to a high school which was two blocks away from us called St. Theresa's High School, which was a Roman Catholic high school. It was a parish. It was two blocks away from home. It was the parish of the Pelham Bay area that we lived in, which was then situated right next to the Hutchinson River Parkway. We lived in an apartment building. We didn't live in a house. I think we were the second black family to live in the neighborhood.

In that neighborhood or in that apartment building?

In that whole neighborhood, not just the apartment building. We were known as one of only two black families in that neighborhood. When my brother left, I went to school at St. Theresa's. St.

Theresa's went from first grade, but I didn't go to kindergarten. I went there kindergarten to eighth grade. High school went from ninth to twelfth. I entered in first grade. At the time I entered my brother had just graduated. He went to St. Raymond's High School, which was also in the Bronx up by Parkchester. That is also a Catholic school. It was all boys. St. Theresa's was co-ed. When my brother went, he only went for three years because he entered like sixth grade. Actually they kept him back, even though he was more advanced than the other students. My brother came from the English system of high school, but I always remembered that they put him back.

Why did they put him back?

I wasn't privy to all the information. Probably one would look back now and say it had some racial issues to do with it. Or maybe because, even though his level was advanced, his age—they were saying, "Well, because you're eight, you should be in the fifth grade, not the sixth grade." When my brother was there, he was the only black kid in the school, the entire school. So imagine K through eighth grade, he was the only black kid for three years. When I came in, I was the only black kid and I was the only black kid to go through the school for all eight years.

There's an important point here because I think this story, as I've gotten older, has really framed for me the issue of innocence. I don't know if other black kids experienced this. I would assume they do, but it depends, I think, on where you learn it. I clearly can remember losing innocence about race and my perception of myself. This happened in sixth grade. It happened when I went to St. Theresa's. There were these two kids who were a year before me. I was in the first grade and they were in the second grade. So for my entire time at St. Theresa's until I got to eighth grade, these guys were always in the class before me and they spent their entire career at St. Theresa's tormenting me about being black. I forget which grade they separate off; I think it's sixth grade. From first to fifth, I think even kindergarten, they keep all the first to fifth in this sort of caged play area by the school. Then when you get to sixth grade, they move you down to a walled-off street between the church and the school, where they wall off during lunch time. So they would play down there. These guys used to always

every lunch time, any opportunity they could get—walking in the hallways, whatever—“You’re black! Blackie!” Once they saw my mother and they saw my father and they were like, “Your mother is white—your mother likes black men,” all this honky stuff and everything.

This is from the second grade on?
This is from the first grade.

First grade all the way up to the eighth?

Yes. I remember one day really running home and just crying and crying to my mother and my brother. It was one Saturday morning and my mother was like, “Why are you crying?” I said, “Because the kids call me ‘black’ at school and I don’t know what it means.” Most people don’t believe this—the Caribbean has gotten very influenced by race relations in the world and today it’s probably not as true as probably in the ’60s and ’70s—but my parents never talked about black and white at home. So black and white to me and to my parents was the color of paper, like here’s black construction paper and here’s white construction paper. It was not a color to define people by. That was my first understanding, and I remember how difficult it was for my mother to not want to explain to me how America defined black and white. So my mother, she never did.

She never did try to explain?

She never did try to. But I sort of figured it out and she explained, “Well, they’re taunting you because of the color of your skin. But your skin is not black, your skin is brown,” and so forth. She basically had told me to stand up and fight. She said, “Don’t ever let anyone call you any names. Don’t ever let me see you crying about this issue because you’ve just got to stand up for your rights,” and all this stuff. So maybe that strengthened me to sort of realize my mother was going to beat me if I didn’t take care of it.

Sort of quickly jumping through elementary school, I graduated as I guess what they would consider here valedictorian of my class. I was always the top in my class all the way through, which was an interesting issue. Being the only black kid in the school, I believe there was a certain perception that I should have been the worst—the worst performing, the worst academically, and so on. Instead, I could tell there was a lot of jealousy among Italians. It was a very strong Italian Mafia neighborhood

also. Certainly the John Travoltas of the world are exactly what that neighborhood was made up of. I could feel when I was graduating that the kids who came in second or third or fourth, there was a lot of envy among the parents about how could this be the only black kid in the school and he turns out to be graduating number one in the school? I could just feel it. I mean, there were some parents I could tell there was honest congratulations and honest responses like, “We always knew you were a good kid,” and all this stuff. But you could just tell there were others who were like, “What is this paradigm that is being broken here? This is not supposed to happen.”

My parents never let me grow up hanging out around the school, around the neighborhood. All my other friends, they would basically play around the neighborhood; my parents said, “Come home and study. We don’t like the kids around this neighborhood. Don’t hang out with them.” I guess it was a really good thing because a lot of them turned out to be drug addicts. Many of them did not finish high school. I found out many are in jail. Some are dead, some are doing drugs. Here we’re talking about a school that’s all white.

You would think you would be talking about some other group of people, like it’s always told. What did you do with your time other than study, if you couldn’t go out?
At home I watched a lot of TV and I interacted with my brother a lot. I mean, basically once you finished your homework, you were hanging around watching cartoons and hanging around with your parents. I used to watch the news. I watched the news a lot with my parents. Maybe that’s something other kids didn’t do. They didn’t go home and watch the news at the age of five or whatever.

There was something very positive about the people at school, in terms of the teachers and the administrators, to allow you to be number one in your class based on performance. In many cases, depending on the kind of teachers you have, that doesn’t have to happen even if you are good.

Right. I think there was only one negative experience. That happened when I was in fifth grade. I think it was the only place I could boil it down to that had something to do with the race. I can’t exactly remember the experience, but I remember that for some reason the teacher was being extremely unfair. It was the only time I had expe-

rienced that at St. Theresa's. I remember that was the only time I ever thought race had something to do with this.

There's one other issue that always defined my experience in elementary school. It had to do with a person who I always considered a genius. His name was Michael. From first grade this kid could draw Charles Schulz cartoons, all of the Charlie Brown cartoons, just by looking at them. He didn't do tracing paper. I remember the biggest thing in the first grade and second grade was to get tracing paper and go over and trace and then say, "Oh look, I can draw." He used to just be able to do this and come up with these creations. All day, all he would be doing was drawing. Everything came to him like he was a genius. Math and science, he never studied for it. He would just know the answers. His family, I think even his brothers were very intelligent. But they were always considered like the weird family because they never hung around with many people, they never dressed very cleanly or whatever. But he was just brilliant and I always defined brilliance against him, intelligence against him.

I always therefore never looked at myself as very intelligent. I looked at myself like I was a hard worker, but he was brilliant. He was intelligent, and therefore I think up to this day I can never put myself in that category of being a genius. Like people say, "Oh, you went to MIT. Look at the grades you have. Those are brilliant." I never accepted that because I have always used him as a model. You look at kids today and you always say, "Oh, the kids don't know what's going on." If I can remember that I was thinking those thoughts at the age of six and the age of seven, it makes me think that a lot of kids understand what's going on in their world at those ages. They understand math, they understand the differences in science, they understand what's supposed to be fun or not. It's how we shape it or how adults tell us, "Yes, you can or you can't do this."

I had very demanding parents. My father was more demanding than my mother, academically. I also would have to say that my father probably encouraged my intelligence. I tell a lot of parents about this now because my father, when I was three, every Sunday between the hours of six to seven or six to eight, he used to force me to read. It was no ifs, ands, or buts. He would always bring a book and I had to read the book. That started at

the age of three. It was always every Sunday. It was always a particular hour. If I was watching TV, the TV went off. He would sit there and he would just give me the book and he would say, "Start reading." And I would have to read.

He would sit there with you?

Yes, he'd sit there with me. But it was also a very tense situation because I couldn't screw up most of the time. He would be very upset if we went over the same paragraph that I did last week and I couldn't sound out the word or I didn't try or whatever.

I think that has a lot to do with my advancement academically. I wish maybe in some ways that he had continued to do that through elementary school, like forcing me to read. I hear parents today talk about, "Oh, you're not supposed to let your kid read too much before—they say that's bad." I've had several parents at work and so forth say, "Oh, our kid loves to read, but we're now discouraging him because they told us when your kid goes to school he'll get bored." I think this is an interesting trend going on about discouraging your kids from reading versus encouraging them.

My father was also very good at math. The worst thing, you never wanted to go and ask dad anything about math. Not only would he give you the longest explanation about it, but there would also be this sort of self-whipping about, "I can't believe they didn't teach you this yet in school. I can't believe these American schools haven't taught you about this calculus and how you do this in calculus." He was always very good at math and I think that had a lot to do about shaping my interest in math and science. He wanted me to go into high school more than prepared.

In junior high school, when you think about people who were very influential in your life, how would you cast that group of people?

One person was our second grade teacher. She befriended my family and also became, I guess, my godmother for baptism. I actually was baptized. That's one of the things the school did. I will always remember that experience. I was not baptized when I was born, or I wasn't baptized in the Catholic Church. I think I was baptized in the Episcopalian Church because my father was Episcopalian. My mother was raised Catholic, but she had basically stopped practicing Catholicism.

They said I had to be baptized through St. Theresa's Catholic Church in order to continue going to the school. So my parents were like, "Fine, just baptize him." I never got the complete story, but I don't think it was that I wasn't baptized. I think it was that I was baptized, but not baptized in the Catholic Church. Considering it was the '70s and the Second Vatican had just passed by, that's probably more what had to do with it.

My second grade teacher was probably the first person, I would say, aside from my parents, to be an influence. My brother was a major influence. He was responsible for me. He took care of me because both my parents worked.

He's about ten years older, right?

Yes. He took care of me when my mother wasn't around and my father wasn't around. He was always there with me after school, made sure I did my homework, all that stuff.

Then there was another teacher—Mrs. Pritchett, I think was her name—in sixth grade, who liked me a lot and encouraged me academically. She always used to say things like, "You're so intelligent. You really know what you're doing." The other person was Sister June Claire. She loved my brother a lot and helped him a lot. She helped me when I was doing a math quiz. I remember I was trying to compete in a math quiz and she stayed after school at my request to give me additional math training. She also liked me because of how I was succeeding academically. I would always win all the spelling bees, the history bees. I would quiz out of all of the quizzes that would happen. We used to have these things where we would go around and do all the spelling bees and so forth. If you got what you wanted, you got 100 on the test plus an additional six points or whatever it was. I would always win them.

There was also this guy I always remember. He used to work for the space program or something, and he ended up being our science teacher one year. I think he was the first person I ever knew who went to MIT or talked about MIT—not that I had aspirations at that point, but I remember how nerdy he was, how very into space and Russia he was. He also spoke Russian, so he was into all of that NASA stuff and the space program. I always remember there was a paper that

was assigned, a research paper in science class, and it was to figure out how to solve the problem about how you could detect what trees grow in light or not in light. I forget what the question was. I remember spending an entire weekend trying to figure this out and I finally figured out what the experiment would be. It was a paper you had to write. I always remember he came to me and said, "I gave some girls in the other class"—boys were in one class, girls were in the other class in eighth grade—"an A on the paper, but now that I look back, you're the only one that I should have given the A to because you're the only one who figured out how the experiment should be done, and the paper was well written. No one else figured out how it should be done."

It was simply an issue of what you would do. It was a controlled environment. What you would do is grow a tree. You would take a tree and plant it inside, then you would take a tree and plant it outside. You would use tree A and tree B. A would have all the sun and B, you would keep the sun away from it. I remember getting the idea like Sunday night before the paper was due Monday. How are you going to grow a tree, and is it possible to really grow a tree indoors? I remember writing that and I'll always remember his comment. I even remember the whole visualization of when he was giving me the paper, and he said it to me in my ear that I was the only person he should have given the A to.

That's a powerful reward so to speak, or a powerful kind of boost at that age in the eighth grade. What about your high school?

High school was a very interesting experience. I really wanted to go to a Jesuit high school in Manhattan, St. Regis High School. That was really where I wanted to go, and I didn't place out on the entrance exam to Regis. I was never clear on how far away I was from it. I could have applied maybe next door to a place called St. Ignatius Loyola, which was the other school right across the street. These were very wealthy schools on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, and I was determined I was going to go because they taught Latin and all of this stuff. It was an all-boys' high school. All of the students who go there get into Harvard.

At that time, I think when I was in eighth grade, I was determined that I was going to have to go to Harvard. I determined early on in life that

I wanted to get the highest degree one can get, and that was a Ph.D. I wanted to go to the best school in the country, whatever that school was. This, I would say, came from my father who always put in this premise of excellence, that you should always strive for excellence. So I always wanted the best. Also, the way my parents brought us up at home—the concept of excellence around how you dress, how you present yourself, the quality of life you live—I just felt that these other credentials had to be added along with it.

I didn't get into St. Regis, but I got into all the other high schools I applied to—three others. I was always focused about what schools I applied to. I applied to—I forgot what it's called, but it's close to the Throgs Neck Bridge in the Bronx. I also applied to Cardinal Spellman High School, which was supposed to be this school that everyone wanted to go to. It's also in the Bronx. It's very well known for its baseball players and so forth. It had a very athletic bent, but it also had a very academic bent. I ended up going to Cardinal Spellman, got accepted there. That was considered to be sort of prestigious. But for me, it was like, "I didn't get into St. Regis, so I'm going to go to Cardinal Spellman."

Cardinal Spellman was a very interesting place. At the time it was about sixty percent white, forty percent black and Hispanic. It was primarily Irish. There were some Italians. The people who attended the school primarily came from Queens; they took the No. 5 train. It was located up in Baychester in the Bronx, close to Co-op City. People from Co-op City—a lot of people from the upper part of Manhattan, even some people as far down as Spanish Harlem—commuted to the school. The Irish community primarily came from the area where I was living, Pelham Bay. The Italian and Irish people came from Pelham Bay, Parkchester, Baychester, Yonkers. There were people who were more from the Yonkers-White Plains area, who came to the school. So there were a lot of people converging on this one school.

The school was very racially divided. Having come from a school that was primarily white, I didn't know what racially divided meant. When I went into Spellman, it was very clear there were divided areas. The administration was primarily white. There were the nuns from the Sisters of Charity. The priests lived in the school. It was not a parish, but they lived in the school—on the

fourth floor, there was a residence for the priests. It was a very politically connected school, very economically rich school, very large campus. It took up a whole block that was basically like a New York block with a very big field on it.

There were two influential teachers I had there. One was Sister Grace Therese Murray, who was my homeroom teacher and my French teacher for four years and whom I credit for my speaking French as fluently as I do. I ended up to find out that my perception of her was as a white woman, a white nun, but she was actually from Trinidad as well. Her father was from Trinidad. She became very good friends with my family and today still communicates with my father and mother. She was always very funny, very alive about the possibilities of life. I loved that about Sister Grace. I traveled to Paris with her and other groups of students, and to Canada. That shaped a lot of my world experience.

The other person was a man named Peter O'Toole, who was our teacher in English and who gave me a lot of encouraging words about my academic skills around writing and my analytical skills. There was once when I gave a paper. I think in junior year I was taking honors or Advanced Placement English, and you had to do a lot of writing papers and stuff. I did a particular analysis on a book and he said, "Never before have I ever had a student give such an analysis on a book that I myself learned from this experience. In my twenty or twenty-five years of teaching English, there's always once in a while someone comes up with something that I've never seen, doing these books over." It was Shakespeare that we were doing. I remember he always gave me those encouraging words. I used to panic. I used to go up to him and say, "How am I going to prepare for it?" He always used to say, "Don't worry about it. You will do fine. You're perfect at analyzing these works," and stuff like that.

The other person was a woman named Mrs. Colby. Colby? I have to mention her because she's the person who pushed me to apply to MIT. She was the guidance counselor who said I was doing excellent in math and science as well as my scores. Even though I didn't like math and science, I would ace all my math and science, but I never felt I loved it. I felt that I had to do it in order to be good academically. She was the one whose daughter was attending MIT for graduate school here.

Had you ever heard about MIT at that point?

At that point I think I had said to her, “What’s this MIT?” She said, “Haven’t you heard about MIT? It’s where the astronauts go.” It sort of clicked in my mind that MIT was a place for astronauts, where they went. It was also my perception that only geniuses go to MIT and I was like, “Why are you even recommending me to go some place like that?”

You didn’t consider yourself a genius.

I thought, “These are people who just invent the world. That’s the people who go there. These are people who know how to understand space. They’ve been born to understand that. You don’t acquire that knowledge. You were born with that knowledge. It’s innate.”

The size of the school, Spellman, was twenty-five hundred students. In my freshman year I was third out of my class academically, third out of all five hundred students in my freshman class. At the time I graduated, academically I was eighth out of all 503 of us who graduated, or something like that. I think the entering class was like 560. By the time we graduated at least sixty people had left. I was eighth and I was the only black person in all four years to be ranked in the top ten of the school.

It was a double-edged sword, because it was the first time in high school that ever I felt the alienation between black and white. I was alienated by black students because I was doing well academically. Because I did well academically, they said I was trying to be white. Yet when we’d go into the big auditorium every year, I think it was planned as an embarrassment for the stupid people in the class. I think this is really how the administration did it. I never liked it. They’d bring you into the big auditorium and they’d say, “Now we’re going to tell you who’s the smartest in your class.” I felt it had more to do with showing the other people in the class, “Look at how dumb you are.” I know the person who was doing it, the particular priest who used to love doing it. He just loved rating people who were dumb, how dumb you were. We were like his pawns to show off. I always used to go, “Oh God, here we go.” Immediately people would say, “You know, Darian, you’re going to be there.” I was like, “I don’t know.” How do you know what everybody’s academic score was in the class? I would always get up there and be in the five.

But in that situation, all the black students and Spanish students would clap—the same ones who would call me names outside. It was because you were holding up the black race. Here we were, eight people out of ten, and you got the perception that a lot of the black students felt, “You know, there ain’t going to be nobody black or Hispanic in this group. It’s all the white kids who are going to be up there.” But then whenever I would get up there, I was the hero. I was the one they could hold up. These were the same kids who would call me names, who didn’t want to associate with me, or they associated with me but you could tell it was very fake. I wasn’t the person they were inviting to their parties. The perception was that if you’re intelligent, you’re nerdy. But they liked me at the same time, so it was really weird. That’s how I remember them.

There was also the bad situation that you end up going to all these HP and AP classes, and everybody in those classes is primarily white. These are the people you have to associate with to share information—what books are you reading, how are you going to study for the test? Therefore, at free time in the cafeterias or whatever, these are the people you’re going to sit around. Naturally, these are people who are going to become somewhat your friends. The perception by black people is, “Oh, you’re sitting with them because you want to be white.” “No, I’m sitting with them because I want to pass my test.” And ironically, I wasn’t also getting invited to either party. It was like some of these kids, their parents were racist. Some of the kids, they wanted to hang around with certain kids. I think with the white kids it was more of an economic status going on. With the black kids, it was more of a who’s cool and hip?

I didn’t fit into either category because it was, “Well, your parents don’t live in some big mansion in the Bronx. Why would we invite you over to our house for parties we have because all of our parents are friends with each other?” The black kids lived too far away from me—they didn’t live in the neighborhood I lived in—and for the parties they went to my parents wouldn’t say, “Go out at eleven o’clock at night and hang out in downtown Manhattan.”

So I considered high school a very isolating experience. I went through it feeling like I was just by myself. I actually have had some very interesting conversations with my mother, where I’ve

explained to her that I don't think she ever listened or realized that that was what the experience was like. Now she says to me, "Yes, I do. I remember you used to come home and complain about the kids who used to say this." So I said, "Yes, but you don't realize when you're doing that every day, when for four years of your life it's just people tormenting you every day, it's not belonging to any group. You're doing that for four years of your life and you're going through the whole changes of being a high school student." So that's pretty much my remembrances of high school.

I do have to interject one thing, which is when I found out that I got admitted to MIT. First of all, I was the only person in my class who got admitted into MIT out of high school. I was the second person in the history of Cardinal Spellman High School to get admitted to MIT. The person who came after me—this is poetic justice—was Elizabeth, how can I forget her name? She was the first Ronald E. McNair Scholar here at MIT.

Oh, I think I know her. She went to medical school in California.

But anyway, the ironic part is that once I got admitted to MIT and I left and I came to MIT, the next year the next person to come to MIT was a black woman from my high school. Elizabeth and I attended the same high school. Actually, Elizabeth and one of her classmates—who is also a black female—came to MIT, both of them in the same year. Elizabeth was the top of her class. She graduated top of Cardinal Spellman High School.

She was exceedingly brilliant.

Yes. I forget the name of the other person. I can see her, and I remember they came and they kept saying, "You're like in the history books of Cardinal Spellman. Everyone used to say Darian Hendricks, Darian Hendricks. You should go to MIT like Darian," and all this stuff. We didn't even know each other during Spellman. It wasn't until I came to MIT that I knew about Elizabeth.

She was only one year behind you?

Yes, but we didn't even know about each other. This goes again to the fact that what I'm noticing is that the history within blacks is that when you get isolated, you're even isolated from your own fellow black intellectuals. So Elizabeth was probably just as isolated.

There are two other black alumni you're going to talk to—Yenwith Whitney from the class

of '49, and Lou Jones—is it Lou Jones? Yenwith Whitney is on the BAMIT board. Then there's Victor Ransom, class of '48. All three of them went to Stuyvesant. Victor Ransom and Yenwith Whitney were one class behind each other in Stuyvesant. They didn't know about each other at Stuyvesant until they got to MIT. They had never met each other or known about each other. They said in the years they went to Stuyvesant, they never even saw each other.

When your counselor recommended MIT, did you apply to any other institutions?

I applied to Columbia. I wanted to stay in New York, actually, so I applied to Columbia School of Engineering and I applied to New York University. I got accepted at NYU and I got wait-listed at the Columbia School of Engineering, because I wasn't smart enough to realize that the admissions applications were different. Columbia wasn't like MIT. You applied to either Columbia University or you applied to the School of Engineering. I didn't apply to both, I just applied to the School of Engineering. The School of Engineering only admits two hundred students a year. What happened was that they ended up having more students who deferred the previous year who said they were coming the new year. The number of students they could admit and let in was smaller, so they put them on a wait list.

I remember I told my parents I would wait. My parents said, "But you got into MIT. Why aren't you going to MIT?" Finally, they convinced me that if I didn't like MIT, I could always go to Columbia. So then I said, "Okay, I'll go." It was an interesting experience because when I tell people today about that, a lot of people say, "I can't believe you were thinking about if you should go to MIT." I was like, "Well, I wanted to hang out in New York."

Had you visited MIT before?

I did. I visited during the Minority Spring Weekend.

What were your impressions?

I liked the campus. I liked the dorm. I stayed with Gerry Fortune. He was sort of my spring weekend mentor. Also through that influence I ended up living in MacGregor for my four years here. Gerry lived in MacGregor. I think I made a decision that that's what I liked. I liked the Boston city life. I wouldn't say I completely enjoyed my four years

in Boston, but I enjoyed the campus life at MIT. So yes, I did visit the campus and I liked the campus a lot.

What would you say was best about your experience at MIT and what would you say was worst about it?

I'd say the best thing was the academic aspect of it—well, let me see, I think the choices that were available. I think one of the best aspects about MIT was my involvement in student activities, particularly the Undergraduate Association. I got to make a lot of networks with administrators here at the Institute. I was able to develop a lot of my skill sets around negotiation, writing, sort of seeing how the institution is run, how we make decisions, how science gets done, I guess how people approach things in the business world.

Academically, the thing that I had the most fun with was my courses in the architecture department. Why? Because I was searching for an experience that was very open and that I was doing a lot of hands-on learning from day one and not waiting, like in mechanical engineering and electrical engineering and civil. They all have these many prerequisites and by the time you get to the courses you really like, it's senior year. I wasn't waiting for that. Architecture was the first department I saw that had the ability that from day one you were into it and you were doing your own thing. You had to define what it is you wanted to do. If you were building a building, how was your building different from somebody else's?

I loved what was going on at the Media Lab. That was my particular interest, the sort of whole spatial imaging stuff, and I liked the way that it was a very cutting-edge class. We didn't even have textbooks because none had been written. I liked that aspect. I thought, "This is what MIT is known for."

Originality.

I loved my humanities classes. I always say that to everyone. The one thing that people could always talk about was their humanities classes. I loved the ability to discourse with others and dialogue about humanity, the humanistic things in life—pictures and films and books and stuff—which you don't really get a lot of at MIT.

You talked about your activities. I remember very well how active you were. You were one of the few students who came to this campus and really got a chance to not only meet but also negotiate with so many of the black administrators. I don't think there was any black admin-

istrator who didn't know you. Where did you learn how to do all this stuff?

I think some of this came when I was in high school, actually. There are two things I wanted to say about that. One was, I did forensics in high school and I was on the forensics team. I won many awards on the forensics team. I think what was good about that was developing analytical skills, but particularly quick analysis because I always wanted to be a lawyer. That was one of my particular interests, which also brings me back to explain how I made the decision to come to MIT. I was doing forensics and I did extemporaneous speaking. I did a lot of research in the library because of forensics, developing case studies and stuff, so you got to see what were world issues going on and developing case analysis, programs, concepts of ideas of how you would solve these issues. Maybe that led me to believe that all you have to do is go do some research, come up with your own ideas, and support them and make them happen.

In high school, there was one thing I wanted to mention about math and science. I'll always remember another experience. I was always number one in my class around math and science, but the one thing that I always regret from my high school experience—and I think this was a little bit about not knowing the negotiation process in high school and how departments run and all that stuff—is that I was always sort of one level behind. Our senior year you got to make a choice to take just sort of AP calculus or sort of an HP math class, like HP trigonometry. I had aced HP classes in my sophomore year and my junior year, but instead of them putting me in the calculus class—the AP calculus class—they told me I couldn't do it. Yet I was the highest student in all the other trigonometry and geometry classes, to the point that I even aced all of the final exams. I was the only person who got 100's and 99's on the final exams for all the math courses.

In one of the exams, I'll never forget this geometry class, the professor never told anyone in the class—I think up to this day people still don't know who it was—it was interesting that no one ever thought it was me. Everyone failed. There was only one person who got a hundred on the exam and that was me, in the geometry class. This was also the class that had all of the brightest students in my freshman and sophomore class. On

the final exam, the instructor, who was this perfect example of what you think of a math teacher—Mr. Cambridge was his name, or something like that—had screwed up one of the questions. So on the exam, I said, “Well, how would Mr. Cambridge”—Haynbridge or whatever his name was—“deal with this? He’s not going to accept that the question was just wrong.” So what I did was I kept working it out and working it out and it was wrong. I worked out his exam question and then I wrote the proof that said, doing it backwards, that this is what the question should have been and this is the answer he was looking for. And I said, “This is the proof to prove that your question is wrong.”

I reworked it three times and I kept saying, “But this can never be right because Mr. Haynbridge has done these tests for twenty-five years and so I must be doing it wrong.” So I said, “You know how to get around this? Work out this question, so if that’s the right answer and he’s looking for that wrong answer, that’s fine.” I did that. “Then work a proof and show him what the question should have been.” Because I did that, he didn’t give everybody else on the exam the credit for the question because he said, “If all of you were smart, you would have done what this one student did, which is to prove what the real question should have been.” I never told anyone it was me. He looked at me in the class and said, “I’m not going to say who it is because I don’t want to embarrass them, but they were the only person who got 100 on the exam and the only person who did that proof, who proved me wrong and did it the right way.”

Why didn’t you say who it was?

I was sort of embarrassed myself, like I didn’t want him to say it. They all kept thinking it was this one girl who was the big loudmouth in the class and everyone was like, “It had to be you, it had to have been you.” Mary Ellen was her name. “It had to be you, Mary Ellen.” Mary Ellen was like, “Who is it? Who is it? I want to know who got it.” I said, “If they ever knew it was the black kid in the class, they would not be happy.” I was known for being very intelligent in math, but none of them thought it was me. No one asked me. There was one person who asked me, who was sitting next to me, this girl named Siobhan. She said, “It was you, wasn’t it, Darian?” I said, “Yes, Shh. Don’t tell anyone.”

So that was the other experience. But why I chose MIT was that I wanted to be a lawyer at the time. My parents always used to read the *New York Times*. We used to get the Sunday *New York Times* and the Sunday *Daily News*. There was an article in the *New York Times*. It was the whole magazine section that talked about how law schools were reforming themselves and how in particular they were looking at engineering students as the best candidates for law school because of their analytical skills. That made me decide that what I wanted to do was get an engineering undergraduate degree in order to increase my application status for law school. I had already determined I was going to go to Yale Law School, because I perceived it to be better than Harvard based on this article. That article came out in January of 1984, it must have been.

How did you adjust to MIT when you finally came here?

I attended Interphase, so I think Interphase had a lot to do with it—the bonding of the class of students. Those students I bonded with in Interphase were basically my support network going through MIT, even though some of them ended up leaving about sophomore year.

I loved MIT because there was so much to do. I only saw opportunity rather than inability to get anything done. The one thing I was dissatisfied with in my experience with MIT, actually, was how I did academically. Even though I got like a 4.4 or something like that, my major was like 4.0 overall. I just felt like I should have been 5.0. I feel like if other students could have done it, I could have done it. I think maybe spending too much on extracurricular activities took away from some of my academic stuff.

But I don’t think that was as much the issue as figuring out how the system works. I think in high school you don’t necessarily have to figure out how the system works because the teachers more or less are guiding you with what you’re supposed to study and when you’re supposed to study it. Even in an HP or AP class, there’s more guidance. I think at MIT—which may be true of maybe not all colleges, but a college experience—it is about figuring out how the system works. I think if you learn the process of how you figure out the system early, that will lead to a lot of your learning later on in life. It’s just like going to any corporation. You have to figure out, well, what’s the game here? How are you really graded? Do

they care that you produce things on time in this work environment or do they care that your thoughts are brilliant? Well, you go to another place and it's like what you're graded on is really producing, producing, producing, and no one could care if it is quality or not.

Are you saying that MIT taught you that?

I think out of my experience at MIT, I look back and think that when you go into some place that's very open-ended, there is some system that's going on in here and there's some game that's going on. I don't want to use "game" in a very negative way, but there are some rules of the game, some paradigms. What are those rules and how do you play them?

I think most minority students are at a disadvantage. I didn't get to go like a lot of my counterparts. I found the kids who did the best at MIT were kids who attended college summer programs in high school. They went to colleges with summer programs during high school, so they understand how a college environment works, and they were doing that since their freshman year of high school. Nearly all of the students I talked to who did great in calculus here and so forth all took calculus six and seven times in high school or they went to their local university—the University of Texas, the community college around the corner, whatever—and they took the same calculus course four summers in a row. So they knew calculus inside out. Then they got here and they play like, "I don't know anything. I don't know calculus. Oh, but I forgot to tell you I took it fourteen times, so that's why I'm sitting here getting these formulas that you're seeing for the first time and you're sitting here going, 'What's going on?'" Then the faculty had the nerve to then say, "Oh look, that student is brilliant because they're getting it the first time around."

And it's not. It's the hiding of information. Most of them knew if they told MIT that they took all these courses in calculus, they would have to be placed out of 18.01. They would have to be in 18.001 or whatever. I remember a lot of students purposely said, "I'm not taking 18.001 because I want to ace 18.01."

Would you say that even the kids in Project Interphase did it too?

Yes. They used to bitch, moan, and complain about how they didn't understand everything. They used

to go and say, "You go home and you figure out the problem set." "But how do you know the problem set if you're saying the same thing I'm saying?" They never clued in. "Oh yeah, my parents happened to send me to the University of Louisiana's math department during the summer"—whatever. Also, a lot of them were using the textbooks that were already being used at MIT. They were all using the exact same calculus textbooks here, so to them the material was not new, or the way it was presented wasn't new.

But what I look back on at MIT and what's a bad experience, I sort of feel like I could have done even better academically. I also think I could have taken more opportunities in UROP than I did. I think there were a lot more things I could do research-wise. I always left MIT, even when I was here, believing that there was so much to do and so little time. In some ways, I wish I could be here for eight years as an undergraduate just doing pure research.

You're talking about a student at that time who had above a B average. Now, I happen to know the grades of students for the past twenty years. You also were very active on campus, probably more than most students whom I know, and still you were above the average. There were lots of things that you learned by being over here that, even if you had gotten an A average, would not have been able to propel you where you are now in terms of your mind, in terms of what you've learned over here. I just want you to understand that. I mean, I hear what you're saying, but I think it's important to make that point.

When you finished MIT, what did you look back on as being the most pivotal things that you really consider very significant, including people? When you look back, what were the things that were very significant to you?

My Media Lab course on spatial imaging. There was an advanced course that only five other graduate students, one other undergraduate student, and I took. I thought that was a pivotal experience because it was the first time I was really immersed in pure research and on my own and doing some cutting-edge stuff. It was also pivotal in that it was the first time I saw the bias—what happens, I guess, in academia. I think it's the closest I came to something that I perceived as racism. I don't know if it was. Here I was, an undergraduate who had very different demand schedules than the graduate students. Of course, all these graduate students were in the Media Lab. They were pursuing either

their master's or Ph.D.'s, I think in most cases it was their Ph.D.'s, and they were in the holography group or the spatial imaging group. To me, it was like they were doing like a play course on honing their skills. Yet I was compared with them in the same level.

It was done with partners. You had teams, it was teams of two. My partner dropped out in the middle of the course. I stayed the course and the person who was grading, who was sort of the TA to Professor Stephen Benton, gave me a B in the course because she kept harping on me about how I didn't finish. I sort of finished the last project, but I half finished it in the sense that it was an artistic concept. I did the back end of the piece and all the other construction and didn't do one piece of hardware that I said I would have liked to have had on the piece. She said, "Unless you do that front piece, I'll give you a B in the class." I ended up not doing the front piece; she gave me the B. I couldn't believe the amount of criticism she gave me considering the fact that I was not a graduate student, so I didn't have all the time the graduate students did. They blocked out all the time in the lab. I didn't have a lab partner and so I was doing this whole course by myself. The course had no textbooks, no papers, no anything. It was based on a course that you had taken, a one-semester course we had taken previously on holography. I thought I was doing very well.

I just found how unfair that was. The only other place I saw that was in the Sloan School, when undergraduates and graduates take the exact same course and they grade graduate students on this A and B curve and they grade the undergraduates from an F to an A. I said, "Well, why is this going on? Why is there a different system for two people?"

So I would think that was a very pivotal experience. Most of my courses that I took in the architecture department were extremely pivotal about my capabilities of doing some stuff. I took a building technology course. This is a course that has been taught for years. It's about how to build a factory. In the course, you have to end up doing sketches and diagrams and build a factory. I ended up wanting not to build the factory everybody else was building. I ended up coming up with a concept that was, I was told, not possible. I did all this research and found out about how to build this more cost-efficient factory based on new technol-

ogy. The professor, I found out, loved the papers that I was doing because of the fact that I had gone beyond the scope of the class and I challenged what everybody else was doing in this class around just building a typical old factory and stuff. I just loved that. I've always challenged MIT around the expectation of, is there a new way of doing things using technology?

The Undergraduate Association, I would say, was a major pivotal experience. I met a lot of my contacts, my classmates and stuff in that experience. I think it was a greater exposure to how the majority here thought. I liked the Undergraduate Association because I liked the politics. It shaped for me how I think minority students perceive themselves here at MIT, relative to how minority students sort of block themselves out of the majority system. The BSU and all these other organizations felt that the only world they could exist in or get resources from were the black administrators, some traditional offices like the Office of Minority Education or whatever. But they never perceived themselves as able to go and ask the president, the provost, the deans of the schools for the same resources they were asking and expecting from the minority administration.

I also noticed that it shaped in my mind what was possible. I looked at other student groups and saw what they were creating and said, "Here we are as black students at a majority institution that has the world's eyes on it. We could do something that puts black students on the map at MIT." That particular concept was the creation of this black library that I talked to Professor Frank Jones about. I guess what I found was again that high school experience, that there was a lot of alienation that also went on at MIT between black students. There was this whole thing about blacks—if you hung around white students, you thought you were white. If you didn't live in Chocolate City, what was your problem? Why didn't you want to apply to Chocolate City? So there was a lot of that going on too. I was shocked that here were intellectual black students—people I never got to deal with when I was a high school student, people I even got to the point of perceiving didn't exist—and now I got to a college in order to deal with them and interact and feel that we have a closeness or bond about the same type of high school experiences that were alienating us from our own communities, and so forth.

I think what I ran into was more denial. I ran into a lot of students who denied that they ever went through that experience. They said, “I never was alienated when I was in high school. Yeah, all my friends were white, but all the black students loved me too.” I was just like, “I don’t think so, but if you say...” Then I found that the things that most of them would talk about, their own negative experiences in high school, they ended up repeating in college among their own community—you know, black against black.

I also found, I always considered this an interesting observation, that I don’t think the way many black students act here at MIT is the way they acted when they were in high school. I think that because there’s an absence of a stratum of blacks at MIT, the intellectual blacks who come to MIT take on a persona of the larger black community in America and feel that there’s a need to represent that on campus. Whether that is their true image is another question. I raise that because, since you’re looking at people and you’re mentioning the observation of remembering people when they were going around campus, I think it would be something interesting to see what people did look like when they were in high school, what they looked like when they were in college, and what they looked like when they came out after. What I’m saying is, I think you’ll notice that there’s a majority of blacks—and particularly, I don’t mean to pinpoint, but I would say particularly the black men who live in Chocolate City—who take on this sort of rap, inner-city personality during their years here at MIT, but don’t continue that when they leave MIT. So it’s like, why did you take on that image? I think it’s like a retaliation, an intent to separate off and to replicate what they think others don’t like about blacks.

I’ve noticed it particularly since I’ve graduated. When I come back to campus, I’ve noticed it even more. I look at some of the guys who walk down the hallway and they look so hard-core. I’m saying, “There is this intellectual. You know there’s this brilliant intellectual underneath and you know they couldn’t be looking like that through high school to get to MIT. I don’t care what they say left or right, there is no way you could have been like that and made it into this Institute for interviews or whatever. Don’t tell me you go looking like that when you go to your interviews for Honeywell and IBM and whoever else.”

So why is this going on at this particular time? I feel it’s because I guess there’s sort of a self-hatred of black intellectuals. I guess since they experienced that most of their years in high school, that other blacks seem to say there’s something wrong with being an intellectual black, that when they come to MIT there’s this like—I don’t know—self-hatred. I don’t know what it is.

Well, it’s a very good point and it’s clear what you’re saying.

I did want to note something you asked because I wanted to make sure it got out in the interview. You asked if there was anyone who was very influential, and there is one person I’ve always defined as very influential ever since I came to MIT—that’s Margo Tyler. She was my freshman advisor. The one thing that Margo always created for me was the sense that anything was possible and that I could do whatever I wanted. She always had examples of people who majored in something and became something else, and people who were flying around the world. She made all my dreams seem like they were very accessible. I think she’s the one person who, even though sometimes I may not keep in touch with her as much, I’ve always defined as sort of my mentor both emotionally and spiritually. She had a very strong spiritual sense that came across. She just had this sense of, “Don’t ever listen to what anyone has to say. You can do it.”

I don’t just mean that from a perspective of black and white. It was also just the perspective of, “If you want to go and fly to the moon, there is a way to do it and we can find out what programs can get you in there.” It was this pure sense that there’s a path to get to wherever you want and all you have to do is find what that path is. I guess it’s sort of a grounding of realism that it was not a dream. It is a reality and someone out there has done it and you can do it too. If you’re going to be the first, there’s just a little finagling you’ve got to do, but it can be done.

One of the things I was going to ask was for you to try to give us influential people in your life as you went through MIT, on the faculty as well as in the administration. Were there any others?

Someone who always left an image in my mind was Professor Wes Harris. I’ve never dealt with the man personally in the sense of as a student. I never talked to him one on one, but I will never forget

a speech he gave. I'll always remember the beginning of his speech, and he also talked about the achievements of blacks in science. At the beginning of his speech he said—I always have to do the calculation every time, but he basically said—"If I gave you something like \$260,000 and told you you had twenty-four hours in which to spend it, would you have a problem spending it? I'm sure none of you in this room would have a problem finding how to spend \$260,000 in twenty-four hours." Then he turned around and said, "Well, God gave you 260,000 seconds in your life, twenty-four hours every day, and how will you choose to spend that time? Why do some of you choose to waste every second of your day?"

I always remember that quote because of the equating of time to money. I always just remembered like it was the reframing of your life. It was saying, "Instead of sitting here complaining and moaning and groaning about why you can't do this and can't do that, just get off your butt and do it." I always remember how powerful that was when he said that.

Another inspirational person was Jim Gates, because he was head of Interphase at the time I came into Interphase. I always loved the way he taught. He was a man who was so brilliant, yet he could explain the most complex things in the simplest ways. I thought that was a natural gift given to him that I just perceived. He was always calm and he was always down to earth.

The other thing about Wes Harris that impressed me was also his style. That always impressed me. Here was someone who had made so many significant achievements, particularly in science—he and Jim Williams—yet they kept their style also. They proved that you don't have to be black and nerdy and look like a fool to be good in science.

The other person who was very influential as an alumnus, and I always remember this because I think this experience affected the rest of it, was Laura-Lee Davidson. She was the project coordinator for Interphase during my year. Laura-Lee had a lot to do with it. I think all of us who left loved Laura-Lee from that Interphase. I remember the experience of going out to Mt. Washington. I remember the experience of going to Martha's Vineyard. We went on a camping trip. I always saw Laura-Lee as sort of this very motherly image. She really cared for us. She always wanted to know

what we were up to, always wanted to know what we were doing academically. I also just liked her spunk and her style around everything, and her honesty.

But it made me remember one of the things that I feel might have slipped away. I'm not a student now, but when I came here there was a strong connection between the senior classes—the juniors and seniors and the freshmen and sophomores—and particularly my freshman class. We knew all of the juniors, we knew all of the seniors. We all used to hang out in OME. At that time, OME was over in Building 12. OME was the place to come out and do your problem sets. It was a place to just hang out. I remember we always did things together. The juniors would go out and they would invite the freshmen. The seniors would go out and invite the freshmen. They always would ask us how we were doing academically, so there was very much a big brother/big sister thing that just naturally happened. There was always this, "We're watching out for you, watching out for you"—sort of what you usually see take place at elementary schools or even in high schools, sort of that big brother/big sister thing. I don't know if that still goes on today. You felt this sense of other people watching out for you, even if it was when you walked through a dorm.

Also, I think it has to do with the class. That class was D'Juanna White, Chiquita White was the year before, the other AKA's who were around at that time who were in McCormick. There was—what's his name? Charles. He was brilliant. I think he's in California, San Francisco—Charles Coleman. Gerry Fortune was a year ahead of me. Who else was there? There was the other young sister. She was very good friends with Charles Coleman. She was in his class—Deborah. She was absolutely brilliant. She was like 5.0 average. She was tall, a little stocky but not heavy. She always had a funny giggle. Then she'd put her hands in front of her mouth. It's not Deborah Rennie, it's Deborah—oh, I've forgotten. I think she used to live in New House, New House or Next House. She was very close friends with Charles Coleman. She always would stop me and I remember she always used to say, "You better get your head to that book, young man, because that's what counts. Don't be going to these little parties over here, AKA. You know what counts around here is getting that 5.0 average." I remember Charles Coleman used to say to me,

“It’s easy to make your average climb. It’s harder to make it stay where it is. If you’re a C average now, all you need to do is get one or two A’s or B’s and you’ll watch your average just jump. I always tell students that it’s easy to get your average to climb. It’s harder to keep it where it’s at.”

There’s a question I like to always ask all of you. You have possibly answered it already, but I’d like to ask you. Based on your own experience, is there any advice you might offer to other black students like Darian who would be entering or planning to enter MIT’s environment?

What is a word of advice to give? I guess I’m trying to search for what’s the core thing that they can apply to anything. I guess the advice I would give is that students really need to find out what it is they truly love and remember what it is they love. In some cases, that might be something that happened when they were three years old and somehow suppressed for the rest of life. It’s like you get Cardinal Warde who talks about the reason he does what he does is because he got exposed to rockets when he was five or so, shooting off rockets in Barbados.

I think MIT has all of the possibilities. It’s just focus, getting focused. I guess that’s really the best advice. Find the thing you love and focus on that. I think there’s enough distractions in this place. You could do a hundred-and-one activities, but I think it’s the focus and discipline that I’ve seen in students who are successful leaving MIT. I’ve always said that. I’ve found the black students who are successful, the white students who are successful, come in with a clear focus. If that focus be, “I am going to get an advanced degree and MIT is the way to get there,” “I am going to do research while I’m here,” “I’m going to invent something while I’m here,” “I am going to get my 5.0 in chemical engineering and go to medical school”—and they focus, they make sure everything they do is helping them to achieve that.

That is the success message for any student here. Even your extracurricular, to an extent your extracurricular is helping you in your focus. But there is nothing they can’t do at MIT. Rarely does anyone tell you you can’t do it. For those who had bad experiences that people talk about, I don’t know, but you can invent or create anything at MIT, which I found at other schools you can’t do. It doesn’t exist.

When you look at a lot of your class members from the freshman class and moving up to your senior year, the dropout rate I’m sure is quite vivid in your mind in terms of those whom you did not see as you rose to your senior year. In what you did know about students in general, what do you think they were lacking in terms of not being able to compete in MIT’s environment?

I think a sense of confidence is one thing, and I think a sense of putting things in perspective. I think that students get wrapped up. Students believe that MIT is unique in the experience that you got through. What you find out is that MIT prepares you, I think, better than any institution about what the real world is like around race relations and how the political games are played, how intellectual people play, how they play in the finance world and the academic world and the scientific world. I think black students are always looking for an easy way out like, “Oh, it shouldn’t be like this. Life shouldn’t be hard, racism shouldn’t be like this.”

But this is the way it is. When you go and work in America’s top corporations, the percentages look the same, the dropout rates look the same, you being alone in the only department where no managers and no senior vice presidents are black. But MIT teaches you, or the MIT experience I think is closer to that. I find that people who have attended other schools didn’t get that, particularly all-black colleges. Then there’s a perception, “Everything is as rosy as my all-black college experience. The world is all these black people who are all going to network together and be living in the same corporation together and promoting each other and all that stuff.” That’s not the way the world in which MIT students want to succeed looks.

So my advice is the focus part. I feel that I could have gotten more out of my MIT experience with focus. I think that if you look at people like James Gates, Darcy Prather—if you look at those people who have excelled academically, like Kristala Jones—one common thing is their ability to focus and their ability to make choices based on their focus. They’re able to say, “I’m not doing that because I need to get the problem set done. The reason I’m getting the problem set done is because I want a 5.0 in physics,” or something like that.

The interesting thing about what you’re saying is that one needs to understand what you mean when you say

“focus.” That does not mean that these individuals, including yourself, are not all over the place doing different things, but they all had a focus relative to where they wanted to go.

Right.

I remember Kristala, for example, came and she wanted to teach a course with me her senior year. She had in mind about being a professor way down the road, and that was for that purpose of getting that experience for herself. You’ve worked in certain activities and those things have helped you based on your own focus. So when you say focus, one needs to understand what you mean, because it’s not like narrowing.

No, it’s not narrowing. It’s making sure that your choices are not random, but are strategic. I think clearly you get that freshman year. Maybe the way that MIT can help students along that path is identifying those students who don’t have focus in the beginning and giving them experiences that help them get focus. Instead of having those students randomly going off to sophomore year when all the departments are recruiting students—I mean, this is something BAMIT could do because we find alumni looking for more interaction with students—is to bring students together around a particular subject area and have alumni share, “Well, what do you really do in the career of a mechanical engineer? What do mechanical engineers do once they leave? What are examples of that? What is the training you get?” This is giving kids the ability of how to analyze courses and departments, how to know that this is the experience they’re looking for, and to know when to back out of the experience.

I remember there was an interview about Ron McNair. Jim Gates wrote, I think, an article for another alumnus who was doing something about him. He wrote that he would always remember that the one thing that he respected about Ron was Ron’s focus, and that he and Ron had this clear focus about what it was they needed to achieve here at MIT. I’ve always said that I think the only reason that I didn’t get the 5.0 was not because I didn’t like what I was doing and I was just all over the place, but that I hadn’t yet really framed in my mind clearly where I was going. I think some people come in here and are very clear about, “I am going to be a surgeon and I’m going to apply to Harvard Medical School and I need to major in chemical engineering. I’m going to do that to get there and this is the particular process

I’m interested in.” So therefore, it helps them to channel the experiences they want and I think it also helps them to feel more satisfied when they leave. This was a stepping stone to the next place, and that’s where they’re going.

You’ve been out in the workplace now for a while, for several years now—in fact, six years. What is it that MIT has been able to provide you that has enabled you to probably to be able to hold your ground wherever you are in that workplace?

Analytical and research skills, as everyone always says. How to break down a problem into its smaller parts. Exposure and breadth, how to absorb any subject matter and understand what are the core facets of that and how to therefore acquire knowledge very quickly in any discipline. Even when I was in MIT internships, I did disciplines that were outside of my discipline. I did chemical engineering and electrical engineering. I had no training for it, but I was able to understand what was going on and therefore contribute either solutions or ways of looking at the problem.

I think MIT has also provided stamina with the long hours and problem sets and so forth. When it’s time at work to be there until ten or eleven at night, you might complain a little bit, but you’re like, “Well, I got out at eleven. That’s not too bad.” Other people, I think, have never experienced that. That is unheard of, what is going on? They’re too busy complaining about it and we’re sort of like, “Well, relative to the rest of the ones I’ve done, this is no problem.”

One of the other things that I’m finding very true—and I think it’s one of the things that certainly BAMIT alumni, Black Alumni of MIT, want BAMIT to concentrate on, but I also think you need to concentrate on as a uniqueness about the black experience at MIT—is how do we encourage entrepreneurial activity? I think that one of the things that I have found in myself is that I’m very entrepreneurial. I don’t know if the aspect of my entrepreneurial behavior pre-existed MIT, was more enhanced at MIT, or became more cultivated at MIT. What I’m also finding is that in every black alumnus, as is true of nearly all alumni of MIT, there is a strong interest in entrepreneurial behavior and inventive behavior, and so forth.

I find at work, the thing that I find most interesting is inventing. I have to say it is the MIT experience. When you come to MIT and when you leave, you realize how far-thinking MIT is as

an institution as far as the academic training, the research training. When you go out to join the rest of the work force, you're pretty much bored with what's going on. You're pretty much bored and you realize that people aren't as willing to charge into defining the future, as at MIT there is a willingness to just say, "This is the way the world should be and it should be like this now." The rest of the world is, "This is the way the world may be twenty years from now and how do we incrementally get there?" Whereas MIT will say, "As of tomorrow, everyone should be on the rub-rub-rub—end of story, and let's do it."

What I found is that the same entrepreneurial behavior that exists in white alumni exists in black alumni, but we haven't cultivated it here at the Institute. That's my particular interest in this whole Robert Taylor Network. It's how to cultivate the concept of entrepreneurial behavior in the black community in the sciences—not just generally but in the sciences, and starting at an early age.

If there's any other topic or other issue you want to mention, this is your opportunity. I may have missed something earlier that you may have wanted to say.

Actually, there's one thing I do have to say. I thought one of your questions would be, did I ever experience racism when I was at MIT? I definitely heard the war stories from all the other students that I had, some stuff I couldn't believe was going on. Not that I couldn't believe like, "Oh, you're lying," but it just was like, "Clearly if I was in that situation, somebody would have been hearing about it." Some people just didn't have that standard.

But ironically, the first time I experienced racism at MIT was when I left MIT. I find the MIT Alumni Association one of the most racist and bigoted institutions anywhere. I've told them that to their face. I don't think I would necessarily put it in those words to Bill Hecht, but I certainly would put it to Diana Strange. The perception and treatment of BAMIT as an organization is appalling to this Institute—the issues of control that go on in the Alumni Association, the behavior of disrespecting. I see that they don't do this to white alumni in any way. Clearly, there's always this student/alumni issue that goes on, but what I've seen in the Alumni Association are very clearly different rules for white male alumni versus black alumni. I don't know so much about women. I think probably the same issue exists for younger

women more than for the older women who have inherited money. There is definitely economic status that goes on in the Alumni Association.

It was shocking to me. For someone who had gone through the Institute and had never, never run into racism and had dealt with a lot of the faculty and administrators, it completely threw me aback to see the types of conversations I would get into with the Alumni Association staff that I considered both disrespectful and insulting. I clearly could tell they would never carry that out with a class officer from, let's say the class of 1950. When you talk to other black alumni, you may want to talk to those who were given leadership positions in BAMIT to define what has been their interaction with Alumni Association staff and their perception of how they've been treated as alumni.

Eric McKissack said to me the other day that he had never been contacted by MIT for anything to give to anything. He said, "You know, Darian, this may be a double-edged sword, but one thing that will go down in history is to give you the credit around BAMIT, that you brought BAMIT to the visibility of the Institute. Those of us alumni who have never been contacted by the Institute for anything, all of a sudden we're being asked to sit on this visiting committee, to be involved in this organization, give money to this one, come speak to this group. I like that, I think that's good. People think I'm that naive to know that they're not contacting me for money, but in many ways I like the fact that MIT is finally recognizing that I exist and that I have achieved status. But what it took was for you to bring an event and people to come to that event, and then they try and act like, 'Oh, we always knew, Eric McKissack, that you existed.'"

That type of not giving acknowledgment? I'll give you a perfect example of something that I consider a big insult. This is something I take very personally. I think some of it is not just black issues, but it's also personal insults that the Alumni Association wants to do. I received notice in the mail that Ken Armstead is going to receive a Presidential Citation Award on behalf of BAMIT for the McNair Fund. I don't know if you know, but the McNair Fund is for this fiscal year more than \$250,000. So they sent the letter to Ken Armstead to accept this on behalf of BAMIT.

I don't understand that. Weren't you the president?

Yes, but wait a second. They cc'ed me on the letter, not to mention that Nancie Barber and the

Alumni Association—particularly Nancie—knew for the last three years that I was the one who asked Ken Armstead to come aboard to co-chair the McNair Fund with me. He did not want to chair the whole thing. His particular area was just that he was going to write this letter and sign his name to it, but that was basically it.

When I joined BAMIT, that fund was at \$30,000. We're talking five years ago. Through the things that I did with BAMIT and the visibility and stuff like that and doing a selection committee with the McNair Fund and pulling together a McNair development committee and stuff, I don't take away the credit from Ken—you know, his name on the letter and so forth had a lot to do with it—but I do see how the Alumni Association wants to take away the credit that I had anything to do with where the McNair Fund is today. When I got the letter, I was glad to see that there was a recognition of Ken, but I also felt this was a complete slap in the face.

Who is recognizing Ken?

The Alumni Association. The letter came from Bill Hecht to Ken Armstead. I was cc'ed on the letter. I'm clearly going to let Ken know, because I don't want him to go under any false pretenses that I was involved in this decision or that I had put his name forward or something like that. I mean, I'm calling to congratulate him and stuff, but I just felt that was such an insult. It's really a Presidential Citation. If I remember correctly, it says Presidential Citation to BAMIT—"and, Ken, we are giving it to you to receive on behalf of BAMIT."

So that's an example of the types of things that happen. There are other alumni who have just as bad experiences with the Alumni Association. To the point that they get involved, that an alumnus like me goes out and calls them to get involved, they get insulted by the Institute and they say, "I will never do anything for the Institute again." I think that in your interviews you may want to even ask people, have they ever found themselves called by their classes to give money?

That's a good question, and I have not so far asked it of others. I think it's a very important question because I see all of you down the road being probably one of the pillars of this place. People may not believe it, but I see it coming, and I know you do. One of the things that's so clear is that all of you are very outstanding people, of whatever color. The country will have to recognize that and it does,

in certain spots. Either they will recognize it when you do it within the community of black folks or people of color, or in the general population. But it's coming.

MIT is going to be very embarrassed if we don't get in on the act of actually supporting you while you are on your way. I agree with you on that. We don't do what we should be doing. I am appalled. The eye-opener for me when I talk to all of you is that we have missed out on connecting with all of you. I think we're going to be sorry about that, because people don't remember you when they're on top. They remember you when you help them get up there. It takes such a little effort. So I will ask a question about that. We've got to be very careful about how we deal with folks. There are so few.

And there's the perception by the administration. I've had conversations with Glenn Strehle—we were talking and the perception is that black alumni from MIT don't have money, they didn't go anywhere. The only people they cite are when they read it in the press—someone who made it, like Arnold Stancell, when they happen to read it and they happen to see that Mobil's CEO says he's the great, "Oh, Arnold Stancell. You have that great alumnus Arnold Stancell." I'm sitting there going, "Well, look at people like Eric McKissack. Look at people like Warren Shaw. Look at John Mack. Look at all these people who have done great things. You can't even find out who those people are because you've already put it in your mind that black students who graduate from MIT, we didn't hear from them, so they aren't doing anything."

The reason why I say this about the Alumni Association is because the Alumni Association is the key place that the Institute hears about these things. They're the ones who have the role of saying, "Well, here are the alumni"—who they are and where they've gone and what they've achieved, making them speakers at reunion panels. It was embarrassing when we had the reunion program. People said it was a shame that BAMIT had to hold its own separate Tuskegee Airmen piece. We had three alumni who were Tuskegee Airmen. The larger Alumni Association should have heard this, but that wasn't even included in the program when they were talking about the World War II era and stuff like that. There was no mention about, "Hey, do we have alumni who graduated from here who might have been part of the Tuskegee Airmen? It was a very important part of the war," and so forth.

I guess what I'm saying, then, is there's always this perception at the Institute. When they want to do anything else, they always know how to go to their own white alumni—"Oh, we must have somebody in the ranks who has done something in this area." But they would never say, "Well, the diversity—the elements of people of color and so forth—are not in the ranks," even when they're putting together their visiting committees and so forth. I'm now beginning to learn about how the process happens, how these things are put together. It's very interesting.

There were efforts, I guess—not recently, but somewhere I guess maybe in the last five or six years. Lois Graham, who is now married and is no longer the person in charge of the visiting committee, really made an effort. I know she would come to me and ask, "Are there people—alumni, alumnae—who could be placed on various committees?" That hasn't happened. That was the only time I can recall that happening. I didn't know people sometimes and I would tell her to talk to other people, but she did make an effort.

I don't think that's happening now. It's something you shouldn't have to be doing. It should be a part of the system, it should be a part of the process. It shouldn't be something that somebody has to come and ask. If they ask, they ought to know who to ask. That's what the Alumni Association is all about.

Right. Well, clearly, I don't know what the Institute perceives around these issues of diversity. I'm trying to address that. With a visiting committee, you should sit there and say not only, "Who are the people who can look at the academic and business aspects of this school or department?" but also, "Do we have a diverse committee of women and minorities and people of color here who can address and raise questions around the diversity of the schools and bring to the table their own experiences?"

I think they're now gradually putting some names of some people on there. There was a black alumnus who was put recently on at RPI. At RPI he was put on the math department's visiting committee. He sent an e-mail around to the BAMIT distribution list saying, "Does anybody have any questions or bad experiences there in the math department at MIT that I could bring with me when I go?"

I'm sure you would get some answers. There are lots of things I could continue to ask because of your major con-

tributions as president of BAMIT. We must maintain BAMIT and it must continue to be strong. Without BAMIT, if we're talking about what we don't have, man, we really wouldn't have anything. I know the kind of work you've put into that since you've taken over and you have made a major difference.

Thank you.