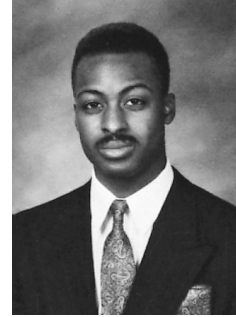


ALTON L. WILLIAMS

SB 1991 (chemistry) MIT, MD 1996 Yale University, JD 1999 University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; instructor, MIT-Wellesley Upward Bound Program, summer 1996; summer associate, Kilpatrick Stockton, LLP, and Alston and Bird, LLP, summer 1998; intern in medicine and surgery, Newton Wellesley Hospital, 1999–2000; resident, Massachusetts General Hospital/McLean Adult Psychiatry Residency Program, 2000– ; as a medical student, served as national committee co-chair and regional treasurer, Student National Medical Association; and chair, Credentials Committee, American Medical Student Association.



I'm here with my son, Dr. Alton L. Williams. Alton, you have lived with your mother and me during your childhood and the early parts of your career. Perhaps you can talk a little bit about your impressions of your early education, some of its highlights, and what kind of impact you think it had on your career.

During my elementary school years, I was one of only a few blacks at that time to live in the city of Newton, Massachusetts—a predominantly white city—and to attend that school system. There were other blacks in the school system, but the majority came by bus from neighborhoods in Boston. There was a difference in my experience, especially socially in the elementary school years, mainly because of being a minority in that particular town. I did have a few friendships with kids who lived in the neighborhood, but it was probably not as widespread a social atmosphere as existed for the average kid in my neighborhood. There were many trips to the museums in the area—the Children's Museum, at that time in Jamaica Plain. My brother and I participated in Cub Scouts, Little League sports—soccer and baseball and basketball. There was no encouragement to play football from our parents. Maybe in their usual parental role, we were discouraged, although my brother did play some football in high school. Most of the kids I was friendly with went to a private school after elementary school. I only hear about a few of them through my parents.

I was involved with a Newton parent-organized basketball league—the “Newton Celtics”—that played in a Boston league during the summer. It was hilarious, and fun to say the least. I don't

think we ever won a game. I am kept abreast of some of the team members through Gregory Heath, Jr., whom I see occasionally.

We visited family frequently and attended national conferences and museums: Urban League; the NAACP was actually held in Boston—I don't think it has been here since the early '70s—and the Schomburg Center in Harlem, et cetera. At school, in the mid '70s and early '80s, there were a lot of positive teachers, both black and white; a very positive principal, who happened to be black; and also good support at home. So nothing troubled me too much. I think part of that experience allowed me to become very comfortable being the only black in any particular situation.

That continued when I went to a small private school in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, for two years. There was even a smaller number of



Edited and excerpted from an oral history interview conducted by Clarence G. Williams with Alton L. Williams in Newton, Massachusetts, 8 November 1998.

blacks, because there were only a few students from Boston neighborhoods. In fact, when I was in the seventh grade, I was the only black in the class and then, in eighth grade, I think I was also the only black in the class. After that, I left and went to Phillips Academy Andover, a prep school in Andover, Massachusetts.

Talk a little bit about that experience at the private schools, both at the first one as well as your Andover experience.

Let me go back first to my early years, to about age five. I don't know when I got my first homework assignment. I guess it was in kindergarten. Anyway, I already had some responsibilities at home, like putting my toys and clothes in the designated places. My first job was walking my neighbor's dog every day after school around 4 o'clock. I was entrusted with the key, you know, to do that every day. I did not let any activities prevent me from doing it—unless I was out of town, in which case I informed my neighbor in advance.

So completing tasks and following through were not new to me. Homework did not have to be monitored at home; it was just completed. There was tremendous communication and excellent relationships between home and school, so I am sure that was a factor as well. The teachers made school fun and at home my parents were always reading, it seems. There was virtually no television beyond "Sesame Street" and others on PBS. I don't remember when we found out that there were other programs on television. I guess my brother and I always "did the right thing" or "did things right," because there was never any punishment. Studying was never a chore, always fun. So when I entered seventh grade, a lot of development had already taken place.

I think the first school was unique. It was one of the smaller private schools in the Boston metropolitan area—grades five to twelve—but it was pretty supportive in nature. It didn't seem like students were pressured to compete with each other. Because of the development that had taken place, I was always in the library after school. There were times when I would go to the library at the end of the day and be the only student there. To be a seventh-grader or an eighth-grader and be the only one in the library—or one of three people in the library—for a school that has three hundred-plus students, sort of made me feel a little bit out of the

norm. But that is what I thought I was supposed to do.

I think that changed significantly when I went to Phillips Academy, because everybody there was pretty much focused on studying and the classes were geared such that most students had to study to pass. You couldn't just socialize and expect to do well there. By ninth grade, people were pretty serious about going to college. The curriculum was designed so that students had to deal with many different things at the same time. For example, everyone was required to participate in a sport every semester. In addition, we had school chores—cleaning bathrooms, raking leaves, and helping the kitchen staff. The students overall were very serious. In addition, the socioeconomic class of students was pretty much at the upper end of the upper-class in the country. Many of these students came from families who had founded major companies or were prominent in national politics.

I think another thing that Andover does is that it kind of puts everyone on a level playing field. As I said, some people come from very upper-class backgrounds. At Andover, in most cases, everyone eats in the same place and the same food, and sleeps on the same type of mattress. Outside of direct verbal communication, it's very hard for fellow students to know another's wealth.

Andover really is more like a college environment. The number of courses that are offered and the way the teachers instruct students is more like college than high school. For example, our foreign language courses did not allow anyone to speak English in the classroom at any time during the year. So even the students beginning in the first-year Spanish would be required to just speak Spanish, even just the basic verbs. In fact, teachers would remove students from the class who spoke English. That's how serious they were about trying to simulate a real language environment, and not just make it sort of your English-speaking people learning the language. They really tried to instill the sense that you needed to learn the language at least at a level to be able to communicate with people, not simply be familiar with the language. It was at Andover that I heard the adage, "Look to your right, look to your left—one of you will not be there . . ." But I knew I would be there.

You had a chance before you came to college to travel to Africa. Talk a little bit about what that experience meant to you and what you learned.

That was a great experience. It was my second year at Andover. The administration hired the first counselor for minority students in 1984. The administrator's official job was programming for minority affairs. That individual, through securing funding from various alumni and corporations—we did a little bit of fundraising on campus—was able to sponsor a trip for about fourteen of us to Dakar, Senegal.

We toured and visited various areas, but we also worked on a community service project which focused on an elementary school on Gorée Island, the most western point on the African continent. Gorée Island is where most of the slaves from Africa, no matter what country in Africa, were all funneled for that dehumanizing journey to America. This was the last ground they would touch before they left Africa. We actually saw the holding grounds from which they departed. It was definitely very emotional.

Our group was mixed racially, both students and faculty/administrators. My sense is that a number of the black students were certainly feeling some anger as we were walking through these structures. We saw the slave quarters, which probably had about a three-foot high ceiling. And on top of those quarters where the slave traders stayed, the ceilings were almost twenty feet tall with windows overlooking the ocean, compared to the slave quarters which had no windows and just mere crawling space.

So I feel that there was definitely a lot of anger and sadness amongst many of the black students. I think there was some frustration and tension among many of the whites as well, mainly teachers and three or four white students. That was certainly a source of some tension on the trip. In addition, it was interesting to see how most of us were pretty happy to be in that environment. It helped me to crystallize where I have come from and the directions I should take if I want to make a contribution in society. I do think we felt very comfortable moving around in that area. Overall, it was an enjoyable experience.

Let's move from your Andover experience to your undergraduate days at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Talk a little bit about your experiences there and

illustrate any highlights or reflections or issues in your life, particularly being a student where your parents were very much associated with the institution.

Because of that, I knew several people at MIT, and also some undergraduate and graduate students and alumni in the '70s. When I got to MIT, I was accustomed to making decisions away from home—the dorm cluster, making friends, and all of that. So when I looked at the rush process, it was kind of an awkward and unique situation for some students to choose their residence so quickly and more particularly the fraternities—how students were invited or contacted. I know that while I was at MIT during the summer before I started freshman year, I was approached by a couple of fraternities concerning my interest in joining, these being the predominantly white fraternities. Maybe it was because I was from a nearby predominantly white town. I think after they had met me, they wanted me even more because they felt that, for some reason, I would be an African-American who would be likely to fit in—and I probably was. I guess at that point, though, I felt that I wanted to stay in a dormitory, so I didn't join any of the fraternities. I didn't join any of the fraternities during the rush. I stayed in East Campus all four years—it is very close to the classrooms, you know.

Then, I think the next opportunity or next highlight was during my sophomore year. Actually, the summer after my freshman year at MIT, I was able to work at Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH). There was a professor at MIT, my father's colleague and at that time the head of biomedical engineering at Massachusetts General Hospital. I had kept in touch with this professor since ninth grade. At one point, I believe he had called me about this particular opportunity. That was certainly a highlight, to work in a hospital at such a young age. The job pretty much involved troubleshooting the equipment patients were on in their units, heart monitors, infusion pumps, cardiac monitors, automated blood pressure cuffs, and breathing devices.

I guess I should be thankful that at that age I was able to work in that area. I knew that MGH was considered as one of the nation's premiere hospitals. I would hear news about it all the time here in New England. And I always knew it had prestige. But because I hadn't gotten into medicine, I didn't necessarily realize the level of promi-

nence, power, and influence, and the level of care that existed at MGH. I had only known through reading and hearing from other people, basically in the Boston area. But when I left Massachusetts and listened to other people talking about it, I realized that MGH was a highly regarded institution nationally and internationally. It was always a great thrill to know that I had worked there prior to medical school.

I can't really say that MIT at all times was a happy place to be. The work at times was frustrating, it was tedious. I always found I had to work pretty hard to do well. You had to work hard just to pass, but then you had to work extremely hard to do well. Usually it was ordinary to stay up until two o'clock in the morning the night before a problem set was due. That wasn't because you waited till the last minute. Oftentimes you had been working on the problem set several days prior to the due date, but it just might take you that long to get through it. I would say that the work was very tedious and frustrating. But I think, for me, one of the things that helped was that I had a good support system. My family was close by and that was certainly helpful. Also, I tried to maintain a pretty healthy attitude by going to the gym and making sure I maintained interest in other things.

How and why did you choose the field you selected to major in at MIT?

The choice was pretty simple for me after the first year, because I knew I wanted to go to medical school. Thus, I was really looking for a major that was somehow connected to medicine. Traditionally, pre-med students often major in biology. I wasn't interested in studying biology. I liked the subject, but I wanted to study something that would allow me to use a lot of spatial relationships and to put things together and pull things apart. So I started to look at things related to materials science.

After trying that out for about a semester, I settled on chemistry. It was a good major, because half of the pre-med requirements are in chemistry. Also, I enjoyed sort of an artistic side to chemistry, in that a lot of the things you learn, particularly in organic chemistry, deal with spatial relationships of how molecules come together, how you pull them apart, and how you make larger molecules out of atoms.

Chemistry was not one of the departments with a lot of African-Americans. Even from the people I've talked to today, there still are not a whole lot when you compare that department to electrical engineering, mechanical engineering, or chemical engineering. Those tended to be the most common majors among African-Americans. Chemistry was not one of them. I was the only black chemistry major in the class of 1991. That made it somewhat of a challenge at times in terms of finding support in my major. A lot of my classmates who were in electrical engineering or mechanical engineering always had someone they could do problem sets with, but that was not always the case for me.

The department of chemistry is unique, as I understand it, for undergraduate students in terms of the support they receive. What was your impression of the kind of support within the chemistry department that you found to be of any significance?

I think that that was definitely a strong point for the department. The undergraduate office was really not simply a place just to turn in problem sets. At the time I was there, they had a woman in the office—Melinda Glidden—who was just incredibly supportive of students, definitely was interested in fostering a good relationship with all the students, and made the office very open and very comfortable. Not only did a lot of the students like to come into the office, even some of the TA's who were grad students would come in there and talk with her, because she made everyone feel welcome.

When you talk about memorable role models and mentors in your studies and your career, could you reflect a little bit on these people who were quite influential in terms of where you are today?

I guess starting with the earliest ones and then moving forward, I would have to say that the first people who were my role models were my parents. When you look at two people who have come from North Carolina—one comes from Saint Pauls, North Carolina, and the other from Goldsboro, North Carolina—and then putting me in a community where there was a good school system and then further enrolling me into Phillips, those actions speak for themselves.

The next role models that I would say had a large impact would be, if we're looking at MIT, two people in particular. I would think of Ernest

Cravalho, who is a professor in mechanical engineering. He was very supportive of me even prior to MIT, and assisted me in getting my first opportunity at Massachusetts General Hospital. After that, I would probably mention Cato Laurencin, who was at MIT at the time and was a very unique person, in that he was a resident at MGH while he was also running a laboratory at MIT. Anyone who knows anything about being a resident in orthopedic surgery in the Harvard program and then also running a lab at MIT would know that that's quite a feat.

I think that kind of covers my early childhood and MIT, and those are the people who stand out the most. I think if I were to speak of the people who stood out as real leaders while I was at Andover, I would say that overall most of the faculty were leaders in some way, many of whom I talk to from time to time.

What was best about your experience at MIT for your four years there, and what would you consider worst?

I think, as I may have alluded to a little bit earlier, at MIT the work can be very tedious at times and it never really stops. It can get frustrating at times just working that hard at such a young age. For some people, their undergraduate experience is a time to develop social skills, organizational skills, and responsibility. I always remember visiting friends I had at other schools, and they were always going to some party. It would be Thursday night or Wednesday night, and all of a sudden there was a party somewhere. I was never able to really do anything like that, or I just didn't. There was just simply too much work at MIT to really do anything during the week, and it would be questionable whether you would really be able to get out and do something on the weekends.

As far as the better things went, a lot of them I don't think I really realized until now. Certainly there's the recognition of MIT in the sciences as being the best, or certainly one of the best. I was actually told by the director of career services at my law school that people assume you are competent when you come from MIT. You definitely benefit from the MIT reputation. Also, because of the vast resources at MIT in terms of laboratories and resources, I think the undergraduates have access to some renowned professors and a lot of cutting-edge work. The Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program, which I participated in

several semesters, definitely puts you right up there in front with a professor, usually working on one of their large projects. You may have a smaller role, but you're in the lab with some graduate students. I don't know how widely available that is at other undergrad institutions.

Having parents who were associated with the institution—myself and, of course, your mother was very much involved in many activities as well on campus—what kind of pressure did that put on you? How did you deal with the issue of your parents being very much involved with MIT when you were a student there?

I don't think it was ever really a big issue. It didn't really cause too much pressure, because mainly the people who knew I had a parent who worked at MIT were in administration. Perhaps in the back of my mind I may have been a little worried at times about never getting into any trouble or having to deal with the administration, but that never really ever was a problem. Most of my professors, I don't think they really knew many of their undergraduate students. Maybe if you dropped by their office frequently during the semester, they would know your name, but basically you went through most of your courses at MIT really not saying much to the professors at all. The main people you related to during each course would be your TA's, the grad students. Those were the people who in many instances would determine your grade and who would have the most scheduled office hours for students.

How would you describe the quality and availability of our services and assistance to you and other black students at MIT?

One of the most positive things I remember was—and I'm not sure this is the right name—the OME Tutorial Program. That was definitely a strong program as a place to go. If you were stuck on a problem set, you could go to that session and get help. I think that's definitely a strong point, because a lot of the students may be the only minority in their class, and may not have someone to at least discuss a problem with and see if they're heading in the right direction. So I think that's definitely a strong point.

I think there were quite a few good programs that were in existence there. There was another program that was offered during Independent Activities Period.

Second Summer?

It may have been the Second Summer program, but it was run during the IAP. It was basically run by Professor Hastings, and we worked together as teams to design a product and present it to the group. I think something like that was very good, because it gave me a chance to work with some other students to accomplish a goal. I think it's important because a lot of students come to MIT never really having to deal with someone who may be quite as smart as they. Second Summer facilitates a dialogue among people who are very intelligent.

Based on your own experiences, is there any advice you might want to offer to other black students coming into MIT or planning to enter?

I guess the first piece of advice I would give them is to just realize that they're at a tough institution. People who finished first in their class in high school may not be in the top quarter at MIT. Most of the time, nobody will ask you about how you did at MIT if you say you graduated from MIT. So even though it can be frustrating while you're there, graduating from MIT is a feat and it's respected in many of the scientific fields without question. Even in law, if you look at patent people and people who work in corporations related to science and medicine, it's respected.

The other piece of advice I would give them is to try to find someone who's doing exactly what you want to do, or similar to what you want to do, because there will be knowledge and information that they will know and that can prevent some potential errors and pitfalls. For example, if you're interested in going into medicine, you should try to talk with some minority or non-minority students at a medical school in Boston or in your hometown. Most people love to give advice, especially in the settings of MIT and Harvard, because they are going to assume they know just about everything, even if they don't. Using resources such as this book will probably direct you to alumni who are practicing law, or are in your area of interest. You may meet some people who aren't willing to give a lot of advice or don't want to talk, but I guarantee you, you keep trying and you will find someone who will be delighted to talk.

The other thing you should do is find one of these administrators at MIT, either in the President's Office or at the graduate school level,

someone you can establish a relationship with. Although they may not be able to tell you everything that is going on in the institution, they may have insight into things that you simply can't assess on your level. Their advice may be able to take those factors into account and provide you with an answer that is helpful as you move through MIT. It's also very important to get to know these people because you will likely need to have people support you even after MIT. Thus, it's helpful if you have some relationship with somebody at MIT who—even two years out of graduation—you can call and say, "I took two years, I worked, I now plan to go to med school, or now plan to go to law school." You definitely don't want to call an institution to ask for letters of recommendation from people who don't know you.

On that same subject, you mentioned that faculty members and administrators—black and white, people of all colors—could be supportive. Based on your own experiences you've had so far in your career, what would you suggest to the institution in terms of how they can enhance the experience of blacks at MIT?

That's a difficult question, only because a lot of the emphasis at MIT is on academics. While I was there, I definitely felt that the administration was trying to improve the quality of life for black students. But again, I always felt like the emphasis there was on academics and that that's what you were there to do.

In terms of improving the quality of life for minority students, I think there is something to say for having people who are further along than you, who are more advanced than you, and who look like you. I think that just goes without saying that it is nice to look up and see an African-American TA or professor. I guess you could say that in an indirect way when you go through all these classes at a high-powered institution and don't see anyone who looks like you, in a subtle way that could be saying that this institution is not really for you and you don't really belong there. You're here more based on your own decision, but in the real scheme of things, we put forth our best and we put our best people in front of you, and it is people who look like this who will be their successors.

The other really important thing I would say—and it's not only on the institution to do, it's partly on graduates themselves—is that there needs to be more dialogue between alumni and

the students who are at MIT now. Some of the difficulties, of course, are that a lot of the graduates are away trying to succeed in such competitive fields, and they can't necessarily take days off to come back. But I think that perhaps the institution can somehow organize a program that allows people to interact with the people who have finished their majors and see what they're doing now, so that current students can perhaps at least have an idea that people have gone before them and that they're not the first ones. A lot of times people feel like they are a pioneer, and they're not always a pioneer. There are people who have gone before them who are out now in areas of academics, industry, government, law, and medicine.

In fact, another thing that sort of points to the importance of this project is that hopefully, if the Institute could make sure that either through the Interphase or the MITES program or other options, people see this book and see the people in this book and see the faces and see their accomplishments, then the students who are at MIT can not only use it as a resource to find people, but they can use it to keep them focused—to tread the waters. They can see someone who finished MIT and got their Master's, Ph.D., law degree, MD/Ph.D., MD/JD, or MBA. They can see these people and they can believe that it's not all that impossible, that there are people out there who are just like them.

You left MIT in 1991. Could you tell us a little bit about what you did the next four years, and what effect MIT's experience had on you in that time you spent after you finished MIT? What were some of the things you think that were helpful to you that you gained from MIT? And what was it you were doing?

When I left MIT in 1991, I entered Yale Medical School. This was something I had known that I wanted to do when I arrived at MIT. I think after MIT, and I heard this while I was there, things are a lot easier—or in some ways easier—than the time at MIT. I think this was because a lot of the work you had at MIT was very theoretical. I found the work at Yale Medical School straightforward. I did not always have to stay up until two o'clock at night to understand it, though I may have had to stay up until two o'clock at night to learn extensive facts. But the facts themselves were not more complicated, you just had a lot more of them. I think that posed a little bit of a

challenge, in the sense that I had to shift from thinking about a lot of different theories and algorithms to just memorizations.

What are some of the highlights for you as a medical student at Yale University?

The early years in the classroom were enjoyable overall. I think one of the things I noticed was that I seemed to do really well at some of the more complex subjects. One of these was the neuroanatomy and neurophysiology course, which was a course that can be very difficult because there are so many pathways. I had to work very hard at that course, but for some reason I was able to do extremely well. I think probably a lot of it has to do with the fact that dealing with all these pathways was similar to a lot of the work I had done at MIT, where you deal with one theory which will lead you to another theory and you piece all these things together. That's what I found was similar to neuroanatomy.

You finished medical school at Yale. For what reasons did you decide to move in the direction that you did, and how has that been so far?

In 1996 when I finished Yale, health care was undergoing a lot of changes and has moved very much from being a private practice-oriented area, where physicians had a lot of autonomy, to health maintenance organizations and preferred-provider organizations. I felt that medical school did not necessarily prepare me to engage in the business aspects of this environment. I wanted to study a discipline that would allow me to deal with both medicine and the structure of health care delivery systems. I looked at various degree options and finally decided on pursuing a law degree. I felt it would have great utility in preparing to analyze regulations and statutes. Legislation is being passed and continually reformed, and I thought a law degree would be excellent preparation.

Is there any topic or issue that comes to mind as you reflect on your own experience and on the experience of other blacks at MIT—or even beyond MIT, as far as your career is concerned?

MIT is one of the most prestigious academic, scientific institutions in the world. Many MIT graduates are pretty well-equipped to probably do anything. It's just a matter of laying out a game plan and following it. However, I think people also need to be able to be somewhat flexible. If you

have an original game plan and if things are not working well, you may have to adapt and approach things in a different way. It's just like, if you have several people in your class who may be competing for one particular position or one particular grad school, you may want to consider doing something slightly different—never losing sight of your goal. But you can oftentimes accomplish your goal by deviating from the plan of the majority of people with similar goals. From a personal and professional standpoint, uniqueness can increase marketability.

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