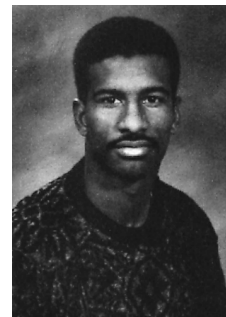


DARCY D. PRATHER

SB 1991 (electrical engineering) and SB 1991 (science, technology, and society) MIT, AB 1993 (philosophy, politics, and economics) Oxford University; associate, McKinsey & Co., 1993-1996; senior associate, James H. Lowry & Associates, 1997; founder and president, What2Read Inc., 1996- , including on-line bookstore, games, and consulting with educational institutions; regional secretary, National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE), 1988-1989; president, MIT chapter, NSBE, 1989-1990; chair, NSBE regional conference, 1990; elected to five-year term, MIT Corporation, 1993; Rhodes Scholar, 1991-1993.



My family—I have my mom and dad, Mollie and James, and a brother and a sister, Daxland and Dawn. I grew up in St. Louis, Missouri. We lived in the city itself, in North St. Louis, until about the summer before third grade. In our neighborhood, we lived in a building on which the first floor were my aunt and some of her kids who were of similar age. I was the youngest child. A block or so away was another aunt and her family, who were all just slightly older in age. So, I was the youngest of about fifteen or twenty cousins who all lived within a couple blocks of each other. I sort of had them as, you might say, role models around as people to observe.

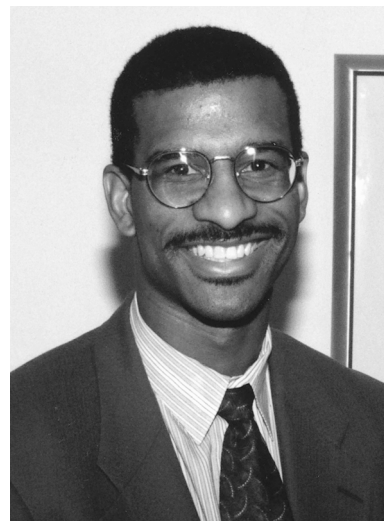
Growing up, I guess my parents—without ever really necessarily stating it explicitly—just assumed that we would always do our best in school. There was never really a question, or in some sense even stress, because that was simply the expectation, although neither of my parents had finished college by the time that they had us. When I was growing up my mom actually went back to school to get her associate's, but neither parent ever got their bachelor's. Then they were fortunate in that at some point in elementary school, all three of us were doing fairly well. Someone mentioned to my parents that they might want to look into the area private schools. They did that and we were fortunate in finding an elementary school nearby called Community School. I was the last one to get in. My brother was the first, and from then on I followed my brother through.

We went to the same school—Community School—and then we went to John Burroughs,

my high school, together. Then he was at MIT before me. He was class of '87 and I was class of '91. He was always able, in some sense, to provide a road map for me and let me know. When I was at MIT, I went to MIT on a scholarship which he told me about. "There are these people and they have this great scholarship you ought to check into"—The Bell Laboratories Scholarship.

Your high school, was it a predominantly black or white high school?

My high school was predominantly white. Actually, I was in the class that I think had the largest number of black students ever. There were, I believe, nine of us out of roughly ninety or ninety-five students. As you look back on it, it's a pretty remarkable group of nine students. I went to MIT. Another friend of mine went to Wharton undergrad. Two of them went to Harvard. Another



Edited and excerpted from an oral history interview conducted by Clarence G. Williams with Darcy D. Prather in Chicago, Illinois, 5 May 1996.

one went to Stanford. Another one went to Washington University. Then the other four—one went to Spelman, one went to like Kansas or somewhere. We all went to college, and I think either seven or eight of us had National Merit or National Achievement scholarships.

What do you accredit that to?

I wish I knew what to accredit it to. It was a remarkable contrast, actually, to my brother's classes at the very same high school. Whereas with me, the group that I started with—I think there were seven when I started and we just added to that group, so we finished with nine. Another person, I think she went to Columbia—oh no, she went to Brown. Whereas with him, three started and he was the only one who had started in seventh grade who finished. A couple came later, but the maximum number was three and he was the only one who went all the way through. And the others struggled.

I am not sure. Somehow we just had enough people that we all bonded together or it was just sort of happenstance or what, but we were all there at the same time. All of our parents thought it was important.

Were there any people who stand out very much in your high school or elementary school as influential?

Yes. I would definitely say that the most influential had to be my immediate family. I had established the expectations and the understanding of what I needed to do, I guess from my parents. I don't want to divide what one said over the other because I think they really worked as a team, in that you never got different messages.

That's helpful. That isn't always the case.

You always got the message, "Do what we ask you to do and if we punish you, you'll understand why. You'll know that you did something wrong. There won't be any confusion." Again, they never said that, but through their actions you understood that. If you did something wrong, you just sort of waited because you knew it was coming and you couldn't complain about it because you knew you did something wrong. They never yelled or got upset for something that seemed trivial, where you couldn't understand why they might be upset or disappointed with you.

I also have to say that my brother was an obvious influence because, being my big brother—he's

four years older than me, the oldest child—you could always look at what he was doing and just assume, "Okay, that's what I'm going to be expected to do later on." When he came home and sat, did his homework, got it out of the way, I was like, "Okay, that's what I'm supposed to do."

To a certain extent, he also helped me understand the transitions. I saw when he went to private school, "Oh, he's bringing home this homework thing. Okay, when I get there, they'll expect me to bring home this homework thing." When he got to high school, and all of a sudden he was spending hours working things out, in the back of my mind I was like, "Okay, I should expect to spend hours working things out. It's going to be hard, it's going to be challenging." At the same time, he also helped set the expectations in terms of doing things beyond the academic work in school, participating in activities. He did football, wrestling, and track, and those are the ones that I ended up doing also. I could listen to him. A couple of times he informed me about different coaches and sort of what they were doing right or wrong, whether you wanted to work with them, and I hung out at his practices and saw for myself sort of what people were doing or not doing.

When I was making a decision on what school to go to, I could ask him the question, "Given what you know that I went through at high school, because you've been through it, how should I expect MIT to be different or the same?" In our particular case, the high school that we went to demanded a lot of work. He said, "Well basically, it's a logical continuation." I knew what that meant and I got there and I said, "Right, it makes sense." For a lot of other students, if someone had said it's a logical continuation, they would not understand.

We lived about half an hour away from school. There was very little traffic. I think we left home at about 7:30 and typically got back at about 7:30 from school. You leave at 7:30, get to school about 8:00 or a few minutes early. By the time we would finish sports practice, it would be about 6:00–6:30 and then it's another half hour to get home. For a few years we took the bus until my brother was old enough to commute, to drive us. So, it was a full day and then you got home and you had homework. If you couldn't finish your homework during the day, you were still looking to do it at night. If you got away with two hours

you were like, “I only did two hours, that was a pretty good night.”

Basically, until you went to bed, you had something to do, is that right?

Right. If I squeezed in an hour or two of television, I was sort of pushing the edge—especially two. I might try to get in one show, maybe if I felt that I was on top of everything.

So actually, it was a logical step then to go to college. Were there any questions about where you would go to undergraduate school?

Well, in the end I applied to just MIT and Princeton. I considered Stanford, but did not apply. It was interesting. You know, in elementary school the only place I knew about was Harvard. That seemed some imaginary place that I wasn't expected to go to, although one friend of mine—I guess it was in sixth grade—said, “Well, you can go to Harvard.” I was like, “What is she talking about? She doesn't know what she's talking about.” What I didn't understand was that she did know what she was talking about because both of her parents had gone to Harvard and all of her uncles and aunts had also been to Harvard. So she knew exactly what she was talking about.

Then in seventh or eighth grade, I guess it was seventh grade, I began to understand because there was a black senior a year older than my brother at my high school named Landon Pate, who was also at MIT. I guess he finished in the class of '86. Landon went to MIT, and by then I knew what MIT was. I knew it was an elite school. I was talking to my brother and I said, “Landon's going to MIT.” My brother was like, “Yeah, I'll probably go there too.” I was like, “What? Really?” That stuff was all going through my mind. I knew my brother's performance at school and I had been able to keep up with my brother's performance. I started thinking, “Landon's going and because Landon's going, you expect to go. That means I should expect to go because I'm doing as well as either of you.”

So from then on my set of expectations definitely changed, and then my mind was set—“Okay, my expectations should be that level of schooling.” Sure enough, I was able to follow through the following years and keep up the performance. In the end it was just between MIT, Stanford, and Princeton. Stanford dropped out when a teacher asked me, “Is Stanford your first

choice? Because, if not, I don't want you to apply.” There were so many students at my high school who were applying to Stanford. Stanford liked students from my high school, so students thought of it almost as a backup. There was a group of students who were doing well who started to think of Stanford as a backup. She was like, “You're doing as well as any of them. I know that you're going to get in. I don't want another person to turn Stanford down.” The previous year, a number of students had turned them down.

Sure enough, after it all went through, my year people actually wanted to go to Stanford and Stanford only accepted three other black students who had applied from my high school. One of us chose to go. That was the only time in my high school when I personally felt a little bit of the tension based on race. Everyone got along fairly well, but it's still about college and your future.

Exactly. So you ended up deciding to come to MIT. Did you visit any of those campuses?

I did visit Princeton. That was the final straw for Princeton, because I got there and they showed you where their equivalent of the BSU was. Princeton is an immaculately kept place, except for where the black students' lounge was, where they had weeds like up to your knees on the walk. If anyone has been to Princeton, they know that anywhere else that is totally unacceptable. So in the back of my mind, it was like, “Something is not quite right about this. I'll just go to MIT, where I know.”

Had you visited MIT a few times, with your brother being there?

I think I had only been there for MITES.

What did MITES do for you? When you went to MITES, what kind of program was it, in terms of the pressure and what you got out of it?

For MITES, the impression that I got was an understanding of MIT's campus. I had a new set of friends. I think thirty—somewhere between twenty and thirty—of MITES people actually ended up going to MIT. So then when I got to MIT, I already felt connected because I had all these good friends from MITES. Also, it was good to be in a group of black students who were doing very well. I had been fortunate in that that was to some extent true of my high school. I had been at a summer camp at RPI. But still, when I think

back on it, it just reinforced that for me. So my underlying assumption becomes, “There are lots of successful black people with whom you can relate and who all have these mutual sets of high expectations.” When you actually get into conversation with some people, they never had that experience and they wouldn’t have that set of assumptions, whereas I don’t think of successful black people as being so exceptional.

Could you talk a little bit about your overall impression of MIT? When you look back at your experience here, reflect on your overall experience and identify what you consider of special significance in your academic, professional, and social life.

I guess the one that probably most people take away with them is, “I’ll never work harder.” When I think about that experience, one of the most important things from it was working hard with people who are also working very hard and enjoying working with them, that there are these common problems and obstacles that you all faced, but you bonded. It became the bonding experience, in some sense, as opposed to a divisive experience, whereas I would say, in some company cultures people working hard can lead to people breaking apart. At MIT, working hard brought you together—at least that was my experience—on the academic side with other students.

I’ll also say that with other students, one of the other important things was living in Chocolate City. Part of that twist to live there was that I had spent all this time in a predominantly white environment. Once we moved into the county, somewhere before third grade, into a mostly white neighborhood and mostly a white school, since then I could easily lose some connection to the black community. But that’s the community that I could always count on for support, and that’s what got me this far. I needed to make sure that I stayed connected. So I availed myself of the opportunity to stay in CC. It reinforced knowing that once you leave MIT, joining that community may be difficult again. Being in CC was a great experience. It reinforced that impression of black people who are very successful and very talented working for a common goal.

Then I would also say it was great for me in the number of different activities I participated in at MIT. I was very active in NSBE, the National Society of Black Engineers, and very active in

football. I did Gospel Choir also. Those were probably the three that absorbed the largest percentage of my time, aside from taking some leadership roles in Chocolate City.

Did you take any leadership roles in those organizations that you just named?

Yes, I was captain of the football team for a couple of years.

How did you become captain?

I think we actually did team elections. We did team votes and coach’s discretion on that. My junior and senior year I was elected basically because, I guess, I was a star player on defense and people saw that as being sort of a role model. I was always there at practice, always working very hard. That’s what I think contributed to that.

The fact is that your peers chose you, right?

Right. Then within NSBE I served as regional secretary and chapter president and a regional conference co-chair senior year. That was a really good experience to look back on because we did so much with the organization. In some sense, for us it was just renewing the organization. A good friend of mine, Bill Buckner, we were both there the same year. At the beginning of our freshman year there was a student—Edwina Hilliard—and she had gotten us involved in NSBE and doing things. She was on the executive board and all the other chapter executive board members were seniors. So getting toward the end of freshman year, she convinced Ed Page and me that we should run for regional office because none of the other schools were sending anyone of any caliber. Ed and I said, “Yes, but we haven’t done that.” She’s like, “You all are going to do a great job. Don’t worry, I’ll help you around to make sure that it happens.”

Sure enough, Ed was elected regional vice president and I was regional secretary. The chapter she was building, she convinced a group of people to run and she said, “Don’t worry, I’ve been around. I’ll make sure that everything goes smoothly because I’m going to be the president,” which she was elected to and well deservedly.

Unfortunately, when the fall came I think she had a number of deaths in her family and for some reason she wasn’t able to come back to school. Suddenly, this anchor to NSBE was gone and we were worried about just being set adrift. Ivey

Webb stepped up from the vice president role to be president for that year and he tried to make sure that we didn't go too far off course. He managed to project a strong image and we managed to recruit this core group of freshmen who decided they were going to become active.

So January, February rolls around and it's time for new elections. I was thinking about running for a national office. But my friend Bill—he had served as, I think, secretary—said, “No, we need you at the chapter level. This past year was a struggle and we need to make sure that things come back together.” So I thought about it and I said, “Okay, fine. It's really important. I can always do something else senior year, but we need to make sure that we take care of our home first.”

We did a couple of things. The most important thing we did was that we started a freshman board. We asked the freshmen to form a board, saying, “You guys can come up with whatever projects you want to and we're just here to support you on the projects you want to do.” We had a couple of things in mind just in case they didn't know or couldn't get things running. We also relied on them to do a lot of the footwork, while we sort of strategized in the back room about what we wanted our chapter to be about. What we ended up setting as a goal was that we wanted to be regional chapter of the year. We set that standard for ourselves and hoped we could grow from there.

And sure enough, we ended up being regional chapter of the year that year, and then the year after that I think we won national chapter of the year maybe one or two years in a row. It's happened ever since then that they get regional chapter of the year, and the question is just, “Will we be national chapter of the year?” The other tradition that sort of started from that is that the board is typically dominated by juniors and sophomores and doesn't have as many seniors on it. So that my senior year, those of us who had been juniors and on the board were now seniors who took peripheral roles where we could just serve as advisors. We had applications and other things to take care of anyway, but we could serve as advisors and we would always be there. We wouldn't have to struggle like Ivey did. He did a great job, but he didn't have anyone around to solicit understanding from.

They seem to have kept that tradition up, and also the tradition of doing well. The reason I say that's a fallback to an earlier phase is that we found

out that early in NSBE's founding, MIT was one of the most important chapters. That history helped start the magazine that is used. We helped host a national conference in the early '80s. But you would never have known it from our freshman year, where it looked like an organization that was trying to do things but hadn't gotten everything together.

That's interesting about the structure of the organization becoming so strong.

Right. So then, looking back on it, I was very happy that I didn't take that national because in some sense it was much more important to reinvigorate our chapter because that's continued. There are talented people doing things.

When you look at your experience at MIT, were there any memorable role models and mentors in your studies and subsequent career?

There were a couple of people. I guess there were three professors whom I found very important in terms of making the academic experience enjoyable. Those were all in the Science, Technology, and Society program. I doubled—I did the electrical engineering program and also a major in the Science, Technology, and Society program. There was professor Sherry Turkle, Larry Bucciarelli, and Leon Trilling. Those three really helped make the experience very enjoyable—Professor Trilling just from the fact that he's a really terrific person, and the fact that here is an MIT professor who is very involved in making sure that blacks who came to MIT were trying to do things better. I've forgotten the name of the program. I guess it was First Summer, is that the name of it?

Project Interphase?

Second Summer. He might have also worked with Project Interphase, I can't remember if he did that.

He did.

He had helped with MITES also.

So here was an MIT professor who took the time to say, “I'm going to be involved in these things.” You met so many other professors who are all nice individuals, but they didn't take the time. They weren't about to take the time. With Professor Bucciarelli, who also took the time, we went on a conference together and bounced ideas off of each other. I guess he's probably still doing those sorts of things, but they really made the experience enjoyable.

I guess I'd also mention Professor Del Alamo, who was my electrical engineering advisor. I didn't interact with him as much as the others, since they also taught me in the classroom. It's funny how I got him to be an advisor. Someone once told me, I can't remember who, "If you want to get an advisor, you ask the department secretary." It was so strange that I couldn't ignore the advice. I didn't understand the dynamics of that. So I went to the department secretary and I said, "Who might I want to have as my advisor?" She said, "Well, Professor Del Alamo is kind of new, but he's doing really exciting things. He hasn't advised a lot of students, but he's a great guy."

Sure enough, he was very good for me. Also, I managed to get him to advise others. I'm not sure if they kept it up, but as senior year came around I realized, "Hey, I've got this great guy. I've got to make sure that someone else taps into him because he actually will take the time to talk to you, which a lot of people say their advisors won't."

Particularly in Course VI.

Right. There was a freshman, Marcus Alan Gilbert, who was going to be going into sophomore year and had to have an advisor. So I said, "How are things going? Are you willing to work?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "Okay, I'm going to give you my advisor's name, but you've got to be willing to work hard." He had said the same thing. I had asked him, I said, "Would you mind if I recommend that someone put you down as their advisor?" He said, "That's fine, as long as they're willing to do the work." That person also said that it was great to have him as an advisor.

So those are the faculty. Those are the people I kept up with.

What about on the administrative side of the house?

On the administrative side, probably the person who influenced me the most was Dean Colbert, Ike Colbert. I'm trying to think of how I first found out about him. It might have been that either NSBE was trying to do something or CC was trying to do something and someone said, "You have to go see Ike." We went to see Ike. Probably Bill came along and we chatted with Ike, and I've been chatting with him ever since then—trying to understand how this strange place works.

You mention how the place works. You have had a chance, actually—maybe more than a lot of black stu-

dents—to really see how the place works in a way that you as a student quite frequently do not get a chance to do. What is your impression of the place, when you look at it from the viewpoint of top-down in a way that is very difficult in many cases for students to do?

From the top down. One thing that does strike me about it, that you don't always appreciate as a student, is really how sincere people are about wanting it to be a better place. Whether you agree with how they go about doing it or not, they really are sincere for the most part in their hearts about wanting to make it a better place. In some sense, that was a pleasant surprise.

The other remarkable thing, I guess, is how effective the visiting committees can be, although I would never have believed it if someone just described how they worked—that anything ever got any better. But that has reinforced to me how important it really is that if you have a concern, you let people know about your concern. While it may be obvious to you that here is a problem you should be aware of, that everyone should understand, a lot of people just don't know to look there. In that sense, I found it really impressive.

Impressive may be a bit strong, because I guess the flip side is also seeing that a lot of people really struggle with what to do. The fact is, if you're able to put together a plan of action about whatever problem you're seeing, there are people who are there to help you to implement that. As a student, I saw some of that in terms of, say, working with Dean Colbert and saying, "Here's what NSBE wants to do. Can you help us out?" We were working with the recruiting office and the same thing happened there in terms of NSBE wanting to put on a job fair. People really were there to help you. I just always appreciate that with this tuition there are all of these people who are there to help you. When your parents wave twenty-five thousand dollars, they really do want that help. They're not there just to make your life painful and force you through this bonding experience.

So I would say that having seen that struggle is almost to build a relationship with your professors, with administrators—a relationship where you can just talk with them about almost anything, not just feel like you need to talk to them because you didn't do well on the last exam or only because you're struggling with the problem set. If you can always have that dialogue going, it's much more valuable. And they appreciate you much more.

One of my best tutorial assistants was in one particular class, it might have been probability. The whole way I was always active and she was a nice person, so I spoke to her. I never necessarily went to her for help and then it got toward the end of the term. I think there was a problem set or something. I couldn't quite get it, so I needed to ask her for some assistance. When I finally called her for assistance, she said, "Well, it's kind of late, but I'm going to help you because you've been there the whole way through. There are other people who didn't show up to class, who never did anything, and they're trying to call me up the day before or at the last minute expecting that I'm going to spend all this time helping them out." But it was the fact that we had spoken the whole way through—that I had been at my tutorials, been at the lectures, and if nothing else said, "Hi."

Actually, I remember that I was just so intimidated the whole time—"Oh my God, it's a professor." You're practically shaking just at the thought of it, let alone actually trying to talk to them. Later on you realize in some sense the professors aren't as proactive as you might hope that they were. They've got a couple of hundred students and they don't know which of them really wants to take this class seriously and spend the time and effort, and which ones don't. They're really waiting for you to step forward and say, "Here I am. I'm going to take your class seriously and I really want to learn something, know what you're doing, why is all of this important to me?" That's in part why they're not as proactive as you might like them to be. But you find, whether at MIT or other places, that people appreciate the persistence because the persistence indicates to them that you really are serious and this isn't just a whim.

You did very well on the undergraduate level. Talk about a typical schedule that you followed in terms of your work schedule.

A typical schedule? I can't even remember. I guess during, let's see, the fall term, I would usually have a lecture by 10 or so. I probably had lectures at 10 and 11. I probably took 1 to 2 for lunch and then would have either afternoon lectures or tutorials—at least one if not two—before football practice. Football practice, probably I'd get there about 4:30. We'd start suiting up. We'd probably leave about 7:30, then walk over with my friend Josh to get some food. That would take to 8, 8:30 or so,

and I'd probably need a half hour just still sort of recovering from practice and then probably put in maybe a couple hours of work. Then try to go to a snack bar or something before they closed. Then probably a couple more hours of work and finishing some time after midnight.

I wasn't a person who necessarily had a rigorous schedule, although some people did. For the most part, pretty much I was sort of constantly moving from one activity to another, whether it was a class or a meeting for NSBE or CC or going out flying for a CC party or something.

How did you handle your Saturdays and Sundays?

Saturdays during the fall would be taken up usually by a football game. That would sort of take away the day and then I would spend at least two or three hours doing nothing. After games, I'd have a headache or something and I'd get a large or medium sausage pizza and a large grape juice, and it was "I'm just going to relax because I've got this pounding headache." Then maybe I would go to a party or something—I didn't go to too many parties, but some event, whether it was the LSC movie or something fun.

Then Sundays—sometimes I went to church, sometimes I didn't. Sunday was the biggest day where I probably didn't really, necessarily have a focused activity. It was more relaxed and then maybe I'd watch a football game or something. Then I'd really get started working sort of after 5 and pushing it. Then in the spring, instead of doing football, I would be doing Gospel Choir practice. I would attend church a little more because we were singing on some Sundays.

When you left MIT, you moved from there to start a different kind of experience. Can you talk a little bit about how you were able to get into a position to take advantage of this new experience? In fact, there is something very special about that; would you talk a little bit about it?

Being in the position to get a Rhodes Scholarship, I pretty much took the philosophy, "I'll do what I'm having fun doing." Even though I could have, say, just done electrical engineering, I found the STS—the Science, Technology, and Society classes—to be fun, even though those were demanding humanities classes. A lot of humanities people didn't actually do as much work as they did for their engineering classes. But in a lot of my humanities classes I actually spent

all the time to read all the books and put in the hours that they expected, because I was having fun doing that.

I really enjoyed football, and that's why I played. I said, "I'm going to play every year as long as I can look back and say, 'I'm having fun, I'm really enjoying it.'" Because if I wasn't enjoying it, it was too many hours of my day and there were too many other interesting things going around at this place for me to waste my time. So with that or being involved in NSBE or helping out with the BSU, I'm not saying every single moment had to be fun, but I had to be able to look back and say, "I'm enjoying doing this. I'm enjoying organizing this meeting or inviting the students over." At some level, if you're not willing to put in the time you're probably not having fun, so you probably really should be doing something else. You're talented—you're at MIT, you must be talented. Maybe this just isn't the niche for you.

Greg Anderson, who is from St. Louis also, was a black student who I think started out in Course VI. He struggled with Course VI the whole time. I think he was originally maybe class of '93. But he never could say he was having fun with it. He might have taken some time off. Ultimately, what he did was he switched to architecture: He went from struggling to being an A student. He just flew through the architecture department. Why? Because he was finally having fun. As he put it once, he made the greatest academic recovery ever at MIT. He was on a scholarship and I think he might have lost his scholarship because his grades had fallen. But when he switched and he finally did what he knew, it was fine. He would always say, "Well, I think I'd have more fun doing architecture, but someone is giving me money to do this. So I'm going to try to fight through it."

It asks too much of you to fight through it. But once he found architecture, it was fine. And architecture is a course that demands perhaps even more time than any other major. But it's a major in which—unlike EE, where you end up with a lot of people who are there because people tell you, "You can get a job doing this"—students tend to be willing to put in all of those hours because they're really enjoying themselves. Once he ended up there, he was set. He was in love with it.

So with the Rhodes, the things that they look for in the end—they look at your academic per-

formance, what leadership you've shown, are you "physically fit" or involved in athletics, and your concern about the community. I had done all of those things because I was having fun the whole time. If I had actually focused on, "Oh, I'm only going to build a career in one thing"—that's not me. I tend to be more of a Renaissance person and want to do lots of different things. I probably wouldn't have been, in some sense, as successful because I probably wouldn't have had all the fun that I had. And I wouldn't have had the breadth that the Rhodes looks for. I was also fortunate because there again was my brother, who suggested the idea to apply.

There are actually a couple of funny stories around applying for the Rhodes. My brother ended up mentioning that the Rhodes looks for someone who has done some athletics. People say, "Oh really?" because most people don't know that there's that component at all—that the Rhodes looks for a very well-rounded person. I said, "Okay, I'm going to go ahead and look up the stuff." I looked it up and wrote to them and asked for their application.

The fall rolled around and MIT decided they were going to take the Rhodes and Marshall scholarship competitions increasingly seriously. I think actually Ike Colbert was one of the people who initiated that, and he may have gotten a faculty member who is responsible for the red tape and a Rhodes scholar himself, so you're supposed to go see him. I got the letters that said go to this professor. I popped into his office. I was one of the first people who popped up, and I asked, "Any suggestions, hints? Any helpful hints?" He was like, "Don't expect them to ask you a lot of electrical engineering questions." For him, he was in mathematics and he said he spoke a lot about poetry. I ended up speaking a lot about starting an inner-city high school, which is sort of an idea that I have along with other people I met at MIT after we had the same idea. So I went and he said, "They'll probably be setting some things up later." I borrowed the course guide for Oxford from him.

So later on, the only other time he called me was to get the course guide back. I didn't speak with him anymore, did the whole application process. The next time that I heard from him was after I had won. He calls me and says, "Hi. I think we've met once before, but I wanted to do lunch because I am supposed to be the faculty member

who helps students through this process.” So we meet for lunch and I’m like, “Oh, hi again. Thanks for your help, sir.” He said, “Well, it’s kind of embarrassing because now that I’ve seen you, I know you came by, but none of the people I helped got it.” I was the only person my year who got the Rhodes from MIT. I was thinking, “You gave people help? No one told me that MIT was giving people help. I came. I showed up at your door. I was one of the first people there.” Personally, I can laugh about it now, but not then.

You said that they were giving people help?

Right. If you go to Harvard, Harvard has a couple of hundred students who will want to apply for the Rhodes. They have a filter system that they use, and they actually help students through. They call and say, “Okay, we’re going to cut it down to a group of fifty students,” or “We’re going to help do practice interviews,” and all of these other things to get them through the process. I had gotten none of that assistance. But I had gotten some assistance, which is the other funny story related to it. Royce Flippin—the head of athletics—when he found out I was applying, he had said, “As soon as you know that you’ve gotten an interview, come by and I’ll help you with the interviews.” Margo and Ike had also said, “We know you’re applying. As soon as you know that you’ve gotten an interview, let us know and we’ll do some practicing.”

So I had gotten my professors and other people to write some recommendations, and I was waiting to hear. People I knew who are familiar with the process had told me, “Oh, I’m sure you’ll get the state interview, but after that no one knows. It’s always sort of the luck of the draw. You should definitely get the state interview. It’s a two-round process. You’ll hear around Thanksgiving.”

Thanksgiving I was away. I had someone check my mailbox. I was checking my messages. I didn’t hear anything. I waited maybe another week and still hadn’t heard anything. I was thinking, “Man, I thought I’d at least get an interview.” I was getting kind of depressed, and I was like, “Well, I’ve got to go on and finish, study or do whatever. But, oh well.” They do all of the state interviews on the same day. They do a dinner on a Tuesday night and then the interview is the following Wednesday. One day my dad calls and says, “Have you heard from the Rhodes people yet?” I said, “No, never

heard from them. I guess I didn’t get an interview.” He says, “Well, they just called here and they were wondering why you hadn’t replied to them.” I was thinking, “What?” He says, “The guy just called here. Here’s his number. You take care of it.”

So I called up the gentleman, who is the secretary for the state of Missouri, and I said, “My dad said you called.” He said, “We were wondering why you hadn’t replied. We were really looking forward to speaking with you.” I said, “I haven’t gotten any information.” He goes, “Everyone else did.” I’m thinking, “I don’t want to get into an argument with this fellow.” I said, “I’m sorry. I haven’t gotten anything.” He was like, “Well, the dinner is tomorrow night. I hope you can make it.” It was either that night or the following night. “I hope you can make it. Do you have a fax number or something? I’ll send a copy of the thing to you.”

I think I ended up catching up to Margo and had the information faxed through her office. Of course, by then Royce was busy. This was in the morning. There’s a snowstorm that was supposed to be rolling in that day, and I had to buy a plane ticket for that day. It was \$990 to fly home and I’m thinking, “I guess I’d better win this thing, because this is a lot of money.” There were a couple of other people, and I tried to see if they could help. I hadn’t practiced at all and they were telling me that two days from now I had to be ready.

So Margo—I actually was fortunate enough—made some time on her schedule for me. We ran through one at least, so I could start to get a feeling for what might happen. I called my professors and said, “Sorry, I won’t be here tomorrow,” caught the plane out, and made it to St. Louis, and then everything clicked after that. The next day, or when I got to Missouri, the state secretary said, “You know what ended up happening? My secretary sent it to 741 Memorial Drive as opposed to 471 Memorial Drive.” 741, I think, is an Amoco station down the street. Then they called me the day before.

Evidently it worked out okay.

It worked out okay. It probably worked out better because I didn’t spend all this time anguishing over saying the right thing. I didn’t know any better.

You did well, right? How was the Oxford experience?

The experience was great because for me it brought out three really important things. One was just seeing the U.S. from other people’s per-

spective. You're in the midst of a group of bodies no longer dominated by Americans. You got a very different perspective and understood some things, like why the rest of the world says America has a problem with race, whereas England has a problem with class. That distinction became much clearer in terms of the issues that different students ran into. England was still struggling with this problem of class. Rodney King happened while I was over there. It's like, America still has this problem with race.

Another really important thing was to see an institution in which humanities came first and the sciences second, which was quite a switch, and getting a point of view and just seeing how different institutions could both be very successful. An engineering and science curriculum is very, very structured—"You're going to do this problem set. Here are the ten things. You're going to turn them in at the end of the week and next week I'll give you a new set and you have to make it through all of those problem sets to even halfway expect to do well on the final." Whereas there, it was a system where you were supposed to write an essay every week, but you didn't have to write the essay every week because you weren't graded on the essay. You left an impression on your tutor, but there was no official recording of that impression and it was much more of an environment in which not just the doctoral students were expected to find their own areas of interest, but also the undergraduates. In the structure each week you might have ten different possible readings that you could write your essay about. You were expected to go find things you think are interesting in those readings, read more about that, go to secondary sources beyond them, but you were expected to find what was interesting. There were no set lectures for any of the courses.

The first day of the semester you'd sit down with your tutor and he would sort of go, "Here are the lectures that I would suggest that you might go to." He would say, "Great lecturer. The material may not be relevant unless you're really going to focus in on this area." He'd go through sort of one by one and tell you which lectures you might choose to go to or not choose to go to. The tutor that you had each week, who was an Oxford don, wasn't the person who delivered a lecture. Nor was the person who delivered the lecture, or the don who tutored you, the person who set the exam.

That's very different.

Right. Whereas at MIT, the same person did all of those things. Even if they didn't do your tutorial, they told the teaching assistant what you were going to cover in your tutorial. If they didn't cover it, you were in trouble. With this, there were three independent people and ways of thinking that you were expected to follow. That was just interesting.

Then there was the opportunity to meet the other Rhodes scholars. You meet a very diverse group. As an African-American, it was really exciting because my year, out of the thirty-two American Rhodes scholars, there were six of us who were African-American males. There were no African-American females and there were only five or six women out of the thirty-two, which was easily the largest number they had ever had. It was great because we met every week, and it turned out that the year before there were maybe four to six African-American males. We all tried to meet every week and talk about issues. We had all done very different things and so we got together.

That's developing excellent connections.

It's a great network still to have. It was unusual for the high number of African-American males. It was also unusual for the low number of females. The classes before us and since, there have always been—not always, but the last few years—sixteen and sixteen, or roughly equal. But that was a great experience. In fact, I guess four of those ended up being in the book *The African Americans*, the large picture book. Peter Henry, who is now a Ph.D. student at MIT in economics, is in the picture; I'm in the picture. Brad Braxton, who's an ordained Baptist minister, is doing his Ph.D. in theology at Emory. He's now going to take over the church in Baltimore where it happens that Mayor Shmoeke goes, who is also an African-American and a Rhodes scholar. He's going to be leading that church and he's not even thirty yet. He's just a great person. Then Marcus Christian was the other person. He's finishing up at Yale now.

How do you feel about that experience, coming back to America and moving in the direction that you have? Just what has that meant for you?

Coming back, I ended up working for McKinsey and Company, management consultants—being in the world of business, which is something I had never studied; I did electrical engineering and the Science, Technology, and Society program at MIT.

At Oxford, I had done philosophy, politics, and economics—their PPE program—because I specifically wanted to do something different. How could you leave MIT and do engineering somewhere else? What does Oxford do well? Philosophy would clearly be something that Oxford would do well and something that would distinguish the experience from MIT.

There is this world of business that I had never had a taste of, although I always had an interest in it. Bernard Loyd was an influence in that. He was already there and came over to Oxford to do some recruiting. There was another African-American, Byron Auguste, who had an offer from McKinsey and said, “Oh, you should look into this. You might find it of interest.” Sure enough, I got an offer and, lo and behold, I’m in the world of management consultants working with the Fortune 500 companies and trying to help CEOs solve their problems and issues and work through the individual divisional issues, trying to understand the politics of the situation and what they want you to say or not say or if you have the right answer, how do you craft the answer in the right way? I’ve been doing that for the last couple of years. That keeps you very busy, to say the least.

That’s been fun, as much fun as I always hoped in some sense, whereas with MIT I had the good fortune—since my brother had been there—I got the very straight truth, right? Here’s someone whose primary interest is making sure that Darcy is successful. So it was very explicit, “Here are the things you should expect.” I grew comfortable with that—“Great, go for it. If you’re not, look for something different.”

That’s something you’ve had with your brother all along, too.

Right. I didn’t have as clear a picture and perhaps I didn’t know how to ask the right question. No one in my family has been remotely as close. So there is no uncle, no aunts—the best I can tell, almost not even a friend of an uncle or an aunt.

It’s like being out there on an island, right?

Who can even begin to describe it, or feel that they could describe it? I think that that is actually one of the more interesting things. Who could feel that they could describe what would happen and also have me be comfortable, in that I felt that they understood what was happening? Actually, since then it has been fun because, as I reflect on it, the

problems of the very large are the same as the problems of the very small. But the very large and powerful never tell the other people that their problems are the same.

They let you be ignorant of that fact. Let you think you’re different, but you’re really not.

Right. So now I always sort of tease my mom, because my mom has many more suggestions in that area. Even though she’s not in those settings, she has a good understanding of how people react to different things. I almost wish I had asked her more, although I sort of realize that she probably wouldn’t have been comfortable giving me advice and I probably wouldn’t have been comfortable really understanding why I should listen to her advice. She would have gotten around on those.

But also, I guess now I still struggle with spending more time doing some things that are more on the community service side, starting again with the school. William Buckner, who is my year, and Mark Dunzo and I had actually crafted a document that describes a general understanding of what the vision of that school might be—a school that somehow allows you to stay based in the community, but still get a broader picture or a world-vision and understanding. You find with many African-Americans, the argument is, “To be successful, you have to be removed from your community that you grew up in. You have to take me out of the inner city. Listen, send me to this private high school for me to be successful.” Other people have actually done studies where African-American students at the elementary school level might lag, but the lag doesn’t grow compared with other groups, and it doesn’t become huge until high school. Then all of a sudden, there’s an amazing disparity.

I worked with a couple of summer programs in St. Louis with my high school. In one of them, the mayor of St. Louis, who is an African-American, said, “We don’t understand why, but they get to sixth grade and we have them on track and they’re saying no to drugs and everyone’s buying into the program, and in seventh, eighth, ninth grade all of a sudden we lose them.” You could see it in his eyes, the anguish.

Then when you talk to people who want to help, it showed two interesting things. The first, which leads to the second, is that everyone says, “Once you’re in high school it’s ‘too late.’ They’re

too old. I can't change them." The behavior this leads to, though, is that everyone, at least in part, wants to help with the elementary school student. You need help, but it's interesting because the gap isn't as significant. It's interesting that the gaps become big when all of a sudden you realize the kids are bigger physically, they are struggling with being a teenager, and now everyone who wanted to help them when they were an elementary school student says, "I don't want to deal with you anymore." The first time when they run into trouble, the impression comes, "It's too late for you. I can't change the way that you do things." Whereas for a lot of these students, it's actually that you're trying to get them back to where they were. You're not trying to create something that never existed within them. You need to become the role model and the help who is there, because if you disappear then all they have are their friends—their friends who have never seen the world outside of their immediate community and can't tell them that there is something bigger, that there are other job opportunities, and yes, it's hard work, but this can really work.

You find that even a lot of teachers will also buy into that attitude to some extent. It really is a lot of hard work, but they do at some point buy into, "I can't change the students. If they want to work, they're going to work, and if they don't, I can't do anything for them. I'm not going to worry about them."

Are you saying that that particular area—gradewise or age-wise—is where we should be putting more effort in, as opposed to the other kids that we start with at the elementary level?

Right, that is what I'm saying—that actually at that age, they may need more help because also that is where, once you've hit fifth and sixth and seventh grade, you do start looking to the high school students as your role model. You do pay, I think, slightly less attention to what your parents are telling you and you start paying more attention to what these other students are telling you. Perhaps that's because when you're in first grade, if a person is a senior in high school or your parent, they're the same from your perspective. You know your parents, so you're going to listen to what your parents say before the others. Perhaps when you become a little bit older, you now realize that these are two different groups. You might say, "Oh, my

parents don't understand what it's like to be a young person in this world." You understand what a concept of the young person is, so you would perhaps look at the high school student more and say, "What should I be doing as a young person? My parents are too old. They're from a different generation, they don't know what's going on."

Perhaps if we came back to the high school student, maybe you have to start in the eighth or ninth grade and just work with and track them through so that you have a solid class, now that those elementary school students can aspire to be those students—the same way I aspired to mirror my brother or Landon and said, when I was in seventh grade, "Those guys are going to MIT. That's what I should expect."

Two other quick questions. One is, as you talk about this, where do you see yourself going at this point? It's somewhat related to what I hear you saying. I think I've heard you say something about this before.

I struggle to understand the timing of the things that I want to do in life. Part of that struggle is that I've always had the benefit of doing lots of different things simultaneously. In some sense, I feed off that. But you find that perhaps you can't divide your energy as much, or perhaps I haven't found the structure for myself in which I can divide that energy the way that I want to. I think it's just a matter of finding the right structure and environment. But I do want to do something with the community and, in particular, with education. That's because I know that someone else had to do that for me in order for me to have those opportunities.

Part of it I saw even in high school, when I ran track. Mr. Gardner was the track coach. He was actually in the first class of black students who had gone through my high school, so in some sense I can relate at a very real level. Here's the guy, and I heard a couple of the stories of what he and his classmates went through being the first black students at that high school. It was not an easy task, as anyone of that early '70s, late '60s period would understand. He helped pave the road so that now there are more opportunities. Someone else used a lot of personal credibility within their own community to say, "We need to do something different. I'm going to take time away—either take time out of my busy career or risk the wrath of my colleagues and other people

working around me to say, ‘We’re going to do something different.’”

So, given that context, I guess I now have had a set of experiences that few people have had. I could say to myself, “Well, I’m not going to worry about anyone else and I’m just going to continue with my career.” But I guess in some sense I’ve seen people who are very successful who find that they end up being isolated—that, in fact, the community of professionals they are with may not fully accept them, as I’ve actually sort of heard from some black MIT professors, they don’t necessarily fully accept them. The community that helped them become successful now sees them as an outsider. In their minds, they said, “I’m going to spend the twenty years to become the best in this,” and now this community that they came from says, “Well, you deserted me. Why are you coming back now?” Then the community that they’re trying to go to says, “I never wanted you. Didn’t I make that clear?”

Obviously, some people fortunately are able to deal with that, make the transition, and were able to benefit from them. A lot of people just end up being very frustrated. I think I’ve had in some sense the taste of that—a very small one, and I don’t want a bigger one. If I can learn from what they did and never have to taste the bigger one, I will work toward that.

But to get back to your original question, there are at least a couple of opportunities to look at doing something that’s more involved with the community—whether it’s the Algebra Project or something else. I know there’s at least one person working at MIT, Janet Moses, whose husband, Bob, is very active in that. I wanted to reconnect with them to see if there might be something in working with them or Alan Shaw, who is in the Media Lab at MIT. He is working with an interesting project, using the Internet to help existing communities renew themselves. Usually with the Internet—at least today, in 1996—people are looking at it as a way of creating virtual communities which have no physical location or to tie persons away from their physical location back to their old community. Perhaps there’s an opportunity actually to say, “We all live together in the city now and today. The problem is, I live in this tall apartment building or I live in a community of houses. I no longer know who has my interests, who perhaps has a child of the same age that I

might want to do something together with, or who likes to play baseball. Is there a way that you can use the computer networks so that that community can draw back together?” I know he has some things around in Newark and Mission Hill in Boston, based on his work at MIT. So I’m going to explore what they’re doing.

Based on what I’ve heard you say in terms of your sequence of events in life, it is not surprising that you talk the way you’re talking now in terms of how you see yourself trying to make a difference. I could say lots about it, but let me just ask one other question. Based on all of your experiences, particularly the MIT experience, what advice could you give to a young African-American Darcy coming into the environment of MIT?

I guess there would be two bits of advice. One is, always try to involve yourself in things that you find interesting and fun. MIT is a lot of work, but what you want to do after MIT is probably also going to be a lot of work. You don’t want to have to think of it as work. You want to think of it as, “I’m looking forward to reading the next book, to solving the next challenge.” You’ve got to look forward to doing that. So to the extent that you can find those things that you find interesting, make sure that you’re doing those things.

And related to that, you might ask the question, “Well, how will I find out what’s interesting? I might think that I know, but how can I find out?” I can pass to the second bit, which is—talk to a lot of people, especially to people who have been to where you think you want to go. I take it for granted that we’ll all talk to our peers, because that’s very valuable. But perhaps even more important is to talk to people who have been to where you think you want to go and to ask them about what it took to get there, what are the things they found enjoyable along the way and still find enjoyable, what are the things that they didn’t like along the way. You’ve got to be able to reconnect to that and say, “Am I going to find those same things enjoyable or not?”

At the same time, in the process of doing that, I think you can build the relationships with professors and administrators which make staying at MIT even more enjoyable than the relationships that you’re going to build with your peers. Everyone I know, when you talk about the MIT community, finds that they really enjoy the community. Perhaps they might have struggled with

the academics, but when you talk about being around a group of people who are concerned for each other and really willing to work with each other, I don't think I've been in a community that matches that or exceeds that. I think MIT is very strong in that sense.

Of my peers and other people I know, the greatest challenge for us was realizing that we should be talking to our professors almost every chance that we get. The initiative has to come from us and then we have to wait for the professors to respond. The more you do that, the more you can enjoy the experience. And if by chance something doesn't work out right, they're going to help you through it. Now you're a person to them, you're not just a student with an ID number. You're a real person with whom they could relate somewhere along the line, when they struggled with something and someone helped them through.

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Reflections on the Black Experience at MIT, 1941–1999

By: Clarence G. Williams

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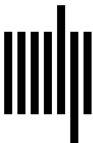
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