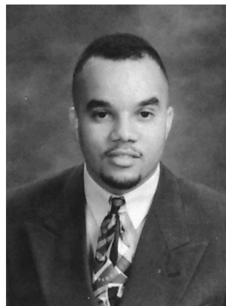
THANE B. GAUTHIER AND KRISTALA L. JONES



Thane B. Gauthier, SB 1994 (materials science and engineering) MIT, MS 1996 (materials science and engineering) Stanford University; from laboratory assistant to senior technical assistant, AT&T Bell Laboratories, 1991-1993; research analyst, CNA Corp., 1994; marketing associate, Silicon Graphics Inc., 1995-1996; product marketing engineer, Applied Materials Inc., 1997- ; president, MIT student chapter, Society for Advancement of Materials and Process Engineering; recipient, Community Service Award, Office of Minority Education, MIT.

Kristala L. Jones, SB 1994 (chemical engineering) MIT, PhD (chemical engineering) University of California at Berkeley; Ronald E. McNair/BAMIT Scholarship Award, 1993; member, IAP Policy Committee, Black Students' Union Task Force on Racial Enlightenment, and Committee on Academic Performance (CAP), MIT; member, National Organization for the Professional Advancement of Black Chemists and Chemical Engineers (NOBCChE); MIT chapter president, National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE), 1992-1993; student producer, "Intuitively Obvious," a video series on black student life at MIT; recipient, Karl Taylor Compton Prize, 1994.

Kristala: Within the range of possibilities of "can we all get along," let's think in terms of numbers. Can we not be hateful? Yes, we can. Can we not call each other vicious cruel names? Yes, we can. Can we not have a guy who is a paratrooper in the military service be convicted of killing two black folks simply because they were black, to be able to wear a tattoo and be one juror away from getting a life sentence? In March 1997—I heard it this morning. I don't know if it was yesterday or this morning. Yes, we can do that. We cannot have CEOs of companies on videotape talking about black jellybeans sticking to the bottom of the bag. We cannot have—in general—cruelty, hatred, and just such viciousness. I think we can be better as people than that.

That's on the left-hand side, yes we can. On the far right, we walk into a room—two people—and when we look at one another what we see does not matter at all. It doesn't cause us to consider certain possibilities. It doesn't cause us to not necessarily pre-judge but presuppose. The good thing about having been in California for me is that, having been raised in Texas, at my high school when I was about in the tenth or eleventh grade, I saw a demographic sheet in one of the counselors' offices. It was 50% black, 48% percent white, 2% other. So as far as diversity, what diversity meant besides black folk and white folk, until I was in college I didn't really understand. I didn't know that other ethnic minorities have issues.

I still believe that black folk are always going to be unique in America because there is no history quite like our history in terms of being just completely ignored as human beings. It's not the same thing as people who chose to come here. No matter how you look at it, most other ethnic minorities chose to come here—with the exception of Native Americans, they're the only people who I think have probably been done as wrong to as black folk, and I don't say that because I've recently discovered that I have a tremendous amount of Native blood. When you look—especially on the West Coast—at the great number of people from Asian countries, I understand that

Edited and excerpted from an oral history interview conducted by Clarence G. Williams with Thane B. Gauthier and Kristala L. Jones in San Francisco, California, 8 March 1997.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886802/9780262286305_c007700.pdf by guest on 17 October 2021

there are prejudices and that they have issues. But I don't think it is quite the same for a people to come and bring assets of a culture with them as they explore, as for people who came and systematically had their culture destroyed with the threat of loss of life.

Given that, we know that and I don't think it's okay to just forget it. We have to learn how to operate from an area where we don't spend so much time thinking about it that we allow it to prevent us from progressing and getting about the business of living and life and moving forward. But I don't think we can afford to ignore it and I don't think we need to ignore it. That having been said, if we are honest enough and courageous enough to really acknowledge the history of the interactions of different peoples in this country, I don't think there will ever be a time when we can have complete trust.

Remember, the left hand is—can we just not be mean and vicious and cruel? That's just asking us to be human. I think that's very possible, but can we ignore or can we have complete trust? I do not believe I will ever see that in my lifetime. I would be very doubtful if it happened in the lifetimes of my grandchildren. It's not that people are trying to hold on so much and trying to wallow in self-pity, but it wasn't that long ago when there was such an extreme disparity—there's still a disparity, an extreme disparity—between what people were allowed to do, where people were allowed to go, who they were allowed to talk to, where they could walk, where they could sit. My grandparents are living and have stories. My mother was in the first integrated graduating class of her high school, and twenty years later I was the first black valedictorian of my high school. My father was in the first graduating class of blacks at his college.

People need to understand why. I consider myself to be an American mutt. I'm a mutt, right? I don't know the history as much on my father's side, but on my father's side my father's mother, as far as I know, was essentially black. My father's father, his mother was white and his father was black. On my mother's side, this is where my Native blood comes from. I just recently, two years ago, found out all this stuff. My mother's mother was essentially what I call black; my mother's father is three quarters Native and one quarter white. His father was half-white, half Choctaw or Cherokee Indian, his mother was half Choctaw, half Cherokee. I was twenty-two years old before I found out my grandfather was not black.

That is a fact. I don't really understand all of the reasons why I never knew this. I kind of started connecting the dots when I came out here. My grandfather has three half-sisters and a half-brother who live out here and whom I had never met until I moved to California. One lives in San Francisco. Two live in Pittsburg, which is about forty-five miles from San Francisco, and one is in Fairfield.

Did you know them beforehand?

I had never met them. My mother had been out here and her sisters had been out here. My grandfather had been here and they had come to Texas a lot as children. They always knew our grandfather and so he knew them. I never knew them and I was talking to one of my aunts about her parents. I started putting them together. It's funny, and I think that's part of the reason why it won't be so easy for us to have mutual trust.

See, my grandfather's parents were never married, although his father always claimed him. His children out here are younger than my grandfather, and when he got married in California he always had our grandfather come and visit. He always had his kids going back to Texas, so that they knew one another. In Texas in the 1940s it was worse to be of Indian descent—Native American descent—than it was to be black. My grandfather didn't grow up with Native traditions, although he was raised by his mother and grandmother. His mother was half Cherokee, half Choctaw. His grandmother was full-blood Choctaw. My mother said she was one of those mean old Indian women: she used to just sit there with her long dark hair and not say anything at all.

So there are those kinds of stories, and it affects who we are as individuals. It gets to the point where we will never have mutual trust because we find so many instances of people being just really heinously abused physically, emotionally, psychologically because of who they are. It's very difficult to get to a point where you allow yourself to open up enough to say, "Okay, I'm just going to forget all about that and we're just going to come from the level of equal trust and respect."

Going back to the initial point, what California is good for is that really it is extremely diverse as far as the ethnicities are concerned. Just forgetting about whether or not people are accept-

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886802/9780262286305_c007700.pdf by guest on 17 October 2021

ing of that diversity, just the fact that you are faced with it forces people in some instances to deal with prejudices, opinions, stereotypes, and what have you that they may not necessarily have known—or even if they did know that they have them, it's easier to find exceptions to that rule. That's the way I believe stereotypes are broken down, preconceived notions. If my opinion of you is that black folk are just dumb, stupid, lazy, dirty or whatever, I'm going to have that opinion until I find someone who is opposite of whatever that is. Initially, then that person is going to be an exception to my rule. It's still not going to break down my stereotype—"They were raised around white folks, that's why they are the way they are. All black people except this one person are so. Twenty-six million people are like this, one person is like that."

With continued interaction and continued exposure, if you're looking at things honestly—and dealing with what the numbers tell you, what your experiences tell you—you're forced to break those down. And California is good for that. I speak of the state as its own entity because that's sort of how the interactions play out. Of course, we understand that there are going to be differences of opinions and a variety of things that go on within that. But California, I think, has made the mistake that a lot of people have made, in believing that this inherent diversity equals equality.

There has to be a necessary step because when we're talking about whether people are going to treat each other as equals, and we get closer to the level of trust, I don't think we'll get to the bottom line, but I think we could move from left to right. You have to have those interactions. You have to see more than what's in your household or what's in your neighborhood in a lot of cases. That diversity has to be a necessary step, but so what if California is more ethnically diverse?

Still, when you look at treatment of people—I mean, Rodney King is in L.A. and, last I checked, L.A. was in California, although it might not be after the next big earthquake, it may float into the Pacific Ocean. The O. J. Simpson verdict was in Los Angeles. I just don't even like talking about it, but the thing that I thought was good about all of that and which was quite funny to me, I really believe, was that white folks were so surprised to learn that black people and white people have a different reality. I mean, they had *Nightline* for eighteen years doing all these community discussions and forums. Every news program and talk show, everyone wanted to deal with, "I didn't know that this and that happened," and whatever. Black people were sitting around going, "And? Tell me something I didn't know when I woke up yesterday and the day before and every day since I was old enough to recognize what race was about."

Where have these people been?

Where have these people been? Right. It is on the way. I think you're going to find more acceptance and openness in some cases in California than you would in, say, New Hampshire or Vermont. But it's not the same thing as having acceptance because, although you have all these different people here, many people in California still believe that black people and Chicanos are just lazy and trifling, and that Asians are super-duper brainiacs who have taken over everything that rightfully belongs to us Americans—I mean, us *white* Americans. It does help to have people mixing, but it doesn't produce the dramatic instantaneous results that I think Californians are trying to have other people think is the case.

The most important area, you're saying, is really the equality issue.

Yes. If we want to talk about "can we all get along," then we're talking about can we treat each other and view each other as equals, as humans. I don't think we do that. Even that's still kind of not all the way. The other way is, once we do that, can we talk about character and can we be people of higher moral character and integrity, so that we can deal honestly with one another?

From what I've seen and what I've heard people say about this part of the country from a surface viewpoint, it is probably one of the better places than every other place I think I've been, in terms of just how people seem to at least deal with each other on a surface level in a way that they appear to be accepting of others. And you've got a real diverse kind of population. But what is the best possible scenario that we can expect?

In what time frame?

Say, in your lifetime.

In my lifetime, the best possible scenario we could expect. I'm twenty-four and let's say I lived to be seventy. Let's say seventy-four, let's say in fifty years. I don't think things are going to be dramatically different. I think if we look at statistics and we

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886802/9780262286305_c007700.pdf by guest on 17 October 2021

look at the Department of Justice statistics for incidence of hate crimes and discrimination suits and all that kind of stuff, I think we can look for the numbers to drop five percent in fifty years.

There are a couple of things that are going to make it both easier and more difficult—or one thing, primarily, and that's technology. The thing that will make it easier, in some sense, is that the Internet and technology in terms of providing access among people will really speed up this process of interaction. I read a column in *Newsweek* just a couple of weeks ago where this woman was telling a story about how her mother spent a lot of time on-line and was talking to some guy, who I bet she had been talking to for a while just in the chat room or whatever, and who just assumed from the way she typed that she was not black and started railing off about black people—shiftless, lazy niggers, and going on and on and on. Her mother had to point out the fact that she may take offense to this because, "Ta-daa!"—jump out into the light and surprise everybody. He apologized to her. I think he was still on that track where, "So this is my stereotype. Now twenty-six million people, except for this one woman I talk to on the Internet, are like this." But it kind of speeds up the process.

So within a select group of people who have that access, then interactions will improve and I think can improve significantly. Where technology is going to hinder that, though, is in terms of access to that technology. We're already talking about a situation where inner city classrooms don't have computers, aren't connected to the Internet, can't browse the World Wide Web, don't know how to use e-mail, haven't really dealt with word processors or any of that kind of stuff.

There's one thing that I've also noticed in being in California that I'm sure I would notice eventually wherever I was. When things start to go badly, people want a scapegoat. I really believe Proposition 187, which was the illegal immigration law in California, completely cutting off benefits—all benefits to illegal immigrants—and Proposition 209, the anti-affirmative action bill, the "civil rights initiative," we tend to think of as anti-affirmative action rather than civil rights, were a backlash of scapegoating when things aren't going as well as we want them to go. When little Johnny doesn't get into medical school, it's not because little Johnny didn't make good enough scores on the MCAT. Maybe little Johnny was just an asshole in his interview. It's not because of that, it's because Tyrone got that spot instead. Tyrone is in medical school at Harvard Med and little Johnny is not and we're mad because little Johnny is *entitled* to go to Harvard Medical School.

So I think the backlash, as ethnic minorities grow, will continue. We've all heard the workforce 2000 theories and people get scared. Racism and prejudice is all a result of fear. People get scared and start to scapegoat. I really think those were a result of scapegoating. On the other side of that, analogous to that, as we have increasing numbers of ethnic minorities in this country and as increasingly more of them have less access to technology, to resources, to education than people in the suburbs and more affluent areas—where there's one computer for every two or three kids, as opposed to one for every twenty or thirty—what happens then is reverse scapegoating, which I think in some cases is largely justified. It's justified in the sense that our feeling is, "We don't have access. We are at a disadvantage." That's true. Where that gets extrapolated so that it really hinders and interferes with us healing and dealing with each other as races in this country is that then we blame all white folk for everything that ever happened to us—"The reason I don't have a computer is because white folks are racist and white folks own the country. So I'm just going to sit home and be mad."

I really don't believe that. I came up with this quote a few months ago that I wrote down because I really liked it when I thought of it, which is that, "Everything that's wrong in our community is not wrong because of racism and white prejudice, but many of the things that are right in our communities are right in spite of it." And I think it's important to realize that, because we get lost on both sides of the spectrum—when we get to the point where we just spend so much time just being mad, when we sit home jobless and broke, mad, no money, no groceries, can't feed the kids, can't pay your rent, but "I'm mad and I'm sitting here in righteous indignation." So we can't get about the business of getting things done.

But on the other hand, we can't just ignore that everyone is not going to be supportive of the things that we are trying to do. We can't automatically assume. I think we always have to have at least plans A through C in order to get around

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886802/9780262286305_c007700.pdf by guest on 17 October 2021

people who really are going to try to stand in our way.

Since the last time we talked, how does this all fit in with what you felt your direction would be, say, two years ago or three years ago?

I've been away two and a half years. I graduated May 27, 1994.

So we're talking about almost three years. Given the issue that you've been talking about here, how have you looked at your career and where you're going and how you feel you can be most effective and be able to do the kind of things you want to do? Has it changed since I talked to you?

None of that has changed. I don't think it's really changed significantly since I was about a sophomore at MIT, and even then not really significantly from when I was a senior in high school. When I left MIT and when I came to MIT, essentially, I always wanted to teach and I still want to teach. My ideal job—my ideal job—would be to be a high school math teacher. I probably won't do it before I'm forty-five or fifty years old, because ideal jobs just don't pay a lot of money these days. When you grow up not having, it's a lot easier to get and then say "I don't need it," than it is to not ever go for it and walk around wondering what if.

So I'm getting the Ph.D. I still want to teach. I want to teach at a university, a research university, because I like science. I'm a scientist and I do like my science. Science for me was access, in a way, but I was fortunate enough and blessed enough that in gaining this access it was also something that I really found to love. I know a lot of people who went to MIT to be engineers because they felt it was an opportunity to basically have a good job and build a good life, but who hated science and technology. And that just doesn't work. I really like the science and I like research and I want to be able to do that. I do think that all of this ties in. Part of the reason I want to do that is because it is important to have more people of color in positions where people of color have not been in large numbers, in order to increase that interaction and to gain initial access and make it easier for other people to gain access. That hasn't changed.

My high school math teacher when I was a senior in high school, my calculus teacher, was an old, old white woman named Verna Smith. She retired a year after I graduated. She had been around a long time. The thing I remember most about her is one incident. I had her third period, and third period we used to have announcements. She would always teach from an overhead. She had an overhead sitting there and she would put her transparencies there and write on the overhead and project it and read it for however long. One day she had stepped out of the room after the bell had rung, while announcements were going on, and someone went and changed the focus on her overhead. She came and sat back and announcements were still going. She cut it on and didn't really shine anything up there, so I don't know how she knew it was out of focus, but she cut it on and kind of looked at us. The announcements finished and she said, "Okay, now, this podium and this space is mine and that desk over there is mine and where y'all are sitting, that's yours. You don't touch my stuff and I won't touch yours." We all went, "Whoa." This woman was bad. This woman was really bad.

But she gave me so much confidence. My freshman year, at the end of the first semester freshman year, I was at the top of my class. It wasn't anything that people announced or anything, but this was Longview, Texas—population of seventy-two thousand in 1986, January 1987. It was still a big deal as far as what black people were doing and what white people were doing. There was one school board member who was black, named Johnson. I don't remember his first name, but his last name was Johnson. He would notice these things. In January of the semester and in February, my mother and my sister and I were at the Ebony Fashion Fair Show and Mr. Johnson came up to my mother and congratulated my mother on my fantastic performance. She said, "Okay, is this anything specific?" He said, "Yes, Kristala is ranked at the top of her class." I stayed there and I kind of had people who told me things that were going on for that. So I stayed there through four years of high school and graduated at the top of my class.

Yet knowing that, I still didn't have real confidence because I was from Longview, Texas, and being at the top of my class in Longview, Texas, for me wasn't the same thing as being at the top of your class in New York City. Calculus was to me the ultimate as far as math was concerned. I didn't even know about multivariable calculus. I didn't know about linear algebra. Calculus was like the golden egg. She gave me such confidence and I

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886802/9780262286305_c007700.pdf by guest on 17 October 2021

was so good at it. She let me know that I was so good at it that I really felt like I could go and do anything. I really want to be able to repay that favor because I think that's such an important time. When you're seventeen, you think you know everything, but everybody else realizes that you don't. You can still be influenced at a time when you're really about to make sort of critical changes and make decisions.

That would be the ideal, but high school kids are bad. I learned that from being in high school. I'm working with some high school kids now, and I just can't do that right now because I do still have the dream of pursuing science. I don't want to get to a point where I wonder what I could have done. That's always been who I am and what I wanted to do. I think I'm just better able to articulate it now, understanding more. The drive, these same things have kind of always been there, but I can say them now when I couldn't before.

Well, you say it well. Let me shift and see if I can get some other information out of you.
MIT was lousy. I hated it. —I'm joking! I'm joking!

How did you go about this decision to come to MIT? You obviously finished at the top of your class and so you probably got a lot of applications and a lot of applications you didn't ask for.
I had a stack in my room for the longest time, with all this stuff. I was going to make a collage out of it. My mother finally threw it away my freshman year in college or my sophomore year. I think she held on to it for a while before I said, "Okay, trash it because obviously I'm not ever coming back to deal with this again."

I was a junior in high school and I asked my history teacher of all people—Ms. Mears, Diane Mears. I said, "Okay, I'm a junior and clearly I've got to start thinking about this whole college thing and where I'm going to go and what I'm going to do." She said, "Well, what do you want to do?" I said, "Well, I really like math, but I don't think I want to major in math because math just by itself to me isn't enough. I want to do something with the math. I really like science, and my favorite science is chemistry." The ones I had taken were biology, chemistry, and physical science—and chemistry was my favorite. "So I guess I'll be an engineer. I'll be a chemical engineer." She said, "Okay, you're going to be an engineer? Go to MIT. You can't do better than MIT." I said, "Okay."

And it really was that simple. I tell people that and they go, "Naw." I asked someone who I trusted. I asked someone who I felt would give me an honest answer and who would not discourage me. She had shown a real interest in me and a real faith in my abilities. I was fortunate enough that most of my teachers in high school did that. There were people in my high school who were not as happy with my success, but I was fortunate enough not to have to deal with any of them directly. I knew they were there because people told me things and they couldn't shut up. If they had just shut up and not said anything about me, I never would have known. But I knew. And I said, "Okay, I'm going to MIT." They would say, "Are you still thinking of going to MIT?" Or they would say, "Where do you want to go?" "I want to go to MIT. I'm positive I'm going to MIT."

I did apply to seven schools. I applied to the University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M, because everybody who is a senior in Texas has to do that and because if you're a valedictorian, actually you get an automatic free scholarship to the University of Texas.

Austin?
Yes. At Texas A&M I had been nominated for a scholarship. My high school had nominated me for a scholarship there, so I had to apply to go there. But I really didn't want to stay in Texas. I didn't want to go to one of those two schools because Texas A&M has about thirty-five thousand students—they did, anyway, when I was a senior—and UT Austin had about forty thousand. They are huge schools, and I didn't want to be in a school that was that big. The other five schools I applied to were Rice University in Houston, Cornell, Stanford, MIT, and Harvard. I only applied to Harvard just to see if I could get in.

Seriously?
Yes—because the thing is, Harvard didn't have a chemical engineering program. I was also thinking about chemistry, just straight chemistry, but I knew I would probably go into engineering. It was funny, because I had to do alumni interviews, and the guy from Harvard drove from Dallas to Longview. We had this meeting in Denny's Restaurant right off Interstate 20. He asked me the schools I had applied to and he said, "If you got in everywhere, where would you go?" I said, "MIT."

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886802/9780262286305_c007700.pdf by guest on 17 October 2021

I told the Harvard guy, "If I get into MIT, I'm going to MIT." He said, "Okay." I said, "Well, quite honestly I'm not sure that I want to do chemistry over chemical engineering, and if I choose chemical engineering I can't do that at Harvard." But I got into Harvard anyway. He probably didn't write very nice things about me.

It came down pretty much to MIT and to Rice. MIT was my first choice and had essentially been my first choice. Rice gave me a four-year scholarship. It was real hard saying no to Rice. My mother knew I wanted to go to MIT and she said, "Look, we'll find a way to pay for it." But Rice was also in Houston and my sister was living in Houston at the time. My sister and I get along famously when we're not together, but the more time we spend together the more tense things are. My mother said, "If you go to Houston, I'm going to lose a child. One of y'all won't survive." So I ended up at MIT. My history teacher had told me MIT and I pretty much believed her, but I'm not going to take everything on face value and so I had read about it and asked other people. The reputation alone was enough. And I visited.

I was fortunate. I've had a lot of blessings. I won't call them lucky breaks—blessings. When I was applying to colleges, my mother had mentioned to a friend of hers the schools I was applying to. He mentioned this to another guy, this white guy in our town, that I was interested in MIT and Rice as my first two choices. He got his undergrad from Rice and his Ph.D. from MIT in chemistry. He said, "Well, she's got to come and talk to me." He is sixty-three. He's my grandmother's age. I went to his office in Cargill Towers. Mr. Cargill and his family were very prominent then in the oil business in East Texas. We used to go to the Cargill movie theaters and all this kind of stuff. I wasn't scared because the worst he could do was tell me to get out.

It's funny because I still keep in touch with him. He and my mother are friends and I see him whenever I go home and talk to him. He came to MIT two or three times while I was there, to my graduation. He's been out here a couple times. A lot of people in the small town of Longview would be intimidated by him because he was a prominent man. The thing he always remembers about me is that I went in and sat down and just treated him like he was anybody else. As far as I knew, he couldn't fly, he couldn't walk on water, and he wasn't going to run a hundred miles an hour. He was a normal human being.

I didn't go during Minority Spring Weekend. He had friends on the faculty at MIT and friends on the faculty at Rice because he had been at both of these schools. He also had taught at the University of South Carolina for a number of years before he came back home to take over the family business. I had been down to Houston and gotten the royal treatment at Rice. They had taken me to the faculty club for lunch and all these things. He said, "I'm going to show you that same treatment at MIT. I don't want you to go for Minority Spring Weekend. If you want to go then, that's fine." It was like coming up real soon. He was going to pay for it because I didn't have money to buy a plane ticket. He said, "But I want you to go when you can really be treated special."

So myself and another friend of mine from Houston who was interested in electrical engineering went at the same time. We got picked up from the airport by Professor Glenn Berchtold and his wife, and got dropped off at the Marriott. Fred Greene in chemistry came and picked us up that next morning. We went all these places and did all these things and saw all these people. The first night, we went to the Kendall Square Marriott and they had made a mistake with our rooms, so they took us to the Marriott in Copley. We stayed in Copley that first night. I came and what really clinched it for me, that it was the right place to be, was the black community there. We ran into some people in the Admissions Office. They took us to New House and we hung out there with people who watched *In Living Color* and *The Cosby Show*. We were like, "Black people, real live black people." That was pretty much it.

Thane: I'm a 1994 graduate from MIT in materials science, a 1996 graduate from Stanford with a master's in material science and currently employed at Applied Materials Incorporated in Santa Clara, California, as a product marketing engineer.

Talk a little bit about your family and where you grew up before leaving your hometown.

I was born and raised in a small town in Louisiana—Opelousas, Louisiana—a town of about fifteen thousand people on a good day. It's in the south central part of the state, so it's in the heart of what most people consider to be Cajun

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886802/9780262286305_c007700.pdf by guest on 17 October 2021

country in Louisiana. My parents are probably the most important influence I've had in my life and continue to be the most important influence I've had in my life to this day. My father currently is a retired school principal. My mom still works. She's a school teacher. She teaches reading to learning-disabled students in the area. If there's one group of people that I can thank for what little I've achieved so far, it's them. From day one, education was it. I couldn't play until I did my work—from kindergarten, first grade, second grade, throughout high school. Some of that sticks with me today.

I guess one of the most important things I also learned from them, besides the importance of education, is just self-reliance. They weren't the type of parents who held my hand and did everything for me. They made me do a lot of stuff on my own. I didn't understand a lot of that at the time. In my mind, they weren't supporting me enough in some of the things that were going on in my life. When I look back at it now, they were just trying to let me grow up.

I can think of a few instances when I was in high school. My high school was eighty-five percent white—a small Catholic high school, about 65 or 70 people in my graduating class, about 250 or 300 people in the high school all together. There were several instances where other people at the school felt I got too much recognition for some of the things that I was doing. I was like, student body president, class president and all that; I was the first black student body president in the history of the school. While I don't think many of the students had a problem with that, some of their parents had a problem with some of that. That caused friction sometimes.

I had several instances in high school where I felt teachers treated me unfairly. My parents told me, "Well, that's something that you need to handle." They're both school teachers and they felt the teacher was right. There were a lot of times in high school where I thought teachers treated me unfairly, and my parents asked me what I thought I should do about it, because they weren't coming to the school and complaining to the administrators and the principal; if I thought I was treated unfairly, I needed to go handle that and see what I was going to do about that.

As a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old kid, sometimes you think that they're not supporting you. But I look at some of my friends whose parents came to school every time something happened and were always hand-holding them to do everything. I see what they had in mind by trying to instill some self-reliance and some maturity in me. I think that's been a major part of where I am now.

Any brothers and sisters?

Yes. I have an older brother who is ten years older than me, so that would make him thirty-five, and an older sister who is eleven years older than me, so she'd be thirty-six. They like to tease me and say I was the "oops" baby; I came along after everyone else, and it was really interesting in my family because all my cousins were either much older than me or much younger than me.

I think that was also an interesting situation growing up, because after the age of probably eight or so—when they went away to college—it was like I was the only child. I was the only child, but I had two sets of mamas and daddies, I had the real ones and then I had my brother and my sister. Like I said, that was good because they had been through things and could impart things to me, I guess—sometimes easier than my parents could—some of the wisdom and some of the things that they had been through. Being Kyle's little brother definitely saved me a few butt-whippings when I was growing up. They're both living in Louisiana right now. My sister was a registered nurse, now she's in hospital management there. My brother manages a restaurant out there. They're both getting along fine—real close, a very tight-knit family. My brother used to work in Longview, Texas, where Kristala is from.

Oh, I see. Did you know him?

Kristala: No, I didn't know him. He moved there after I had gone to school. I told my mother and she was going to seek him out at one point. I don't know if she ever found him.

Thane: So we're real tight to this day. It's not the type of family that when I call them on the phone it's always, "I love you this, I love you that," but you know. A lot of times people get on me because I might not be the most expressive person sometimes—I mean, expressive when it comes to expressing feelings. That's how my family was. It's understood. We go to bat for each other. That's the way it should be, I think.

Say a little bit about the process of coming to a decision to come to MIT. How did you find out about the place?

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886802/9780262286305_c007700.pdf by guest on 17 October 2021

You applied, I assume, to a lot of schools. Talk a little bit about that.
I actually didn't know that much about MIT when I was coming up. By the time I got to be like a freshman or sophomore in high school, I knew I wanted to go away to college somewhere. I didn't really think I wanted to stay in Louisiana. I thought I wanted to go somewhere else and see what was out there. I didn't know that much about MIT, but it was kind of a running joke with my dad. He was like, "Yeah, you need to go to MIT."

He had heard about MIT. It turns out, I guess, one spring of maybe my sophomore year, there was an article in our newspaper. We got the Baton Rouge, Louisiana, newspaper where I was from. There was an article about a set of twins from Baton Rouge who had gotten accepted to this program for minorities at MIT called the MITES program. My dad was still a high school principal, so he called up their principal or their guidance counselor and got the information about the program for me. I applied to the MITES program and was accepted. It's actually interesting—my dad and I laugh about this to this day sometimes—but I wasn't sure I was going to go to the MITES program because that was my prime football training season.

Kristala: You thought you were going to the NFL.—Sorry, I just had to throw that in there.

Thane: Well, it's true. Louisiana football, it's a religion. We trained year 'round and that was a big decision for me. It wasn't a decision in my dad's mind. In his mind, I was going to that summer program regardless of what I thought I was going to do. I found out about the program from Garvin and Griffin Davis, who I guess graduated in what, '92? (Kristala: '93.) They had an article in the paper about them and I found out about that. In that article, they also mentioned that they had gotten scholarships through AT&T that fully paid for their education. So when my dad called and got the information about the MITES program, he also got information about the scholarship. I applied for the scholarship, and got the scholarship too. I laugh with Garvin and Griffin, because we're fairly good friends now, that they're the reason why I came to MIT. I don't think they knew it at the time, but it just kind of opened my eyes. You hear about MIT and it's like you don't think that's something that you can really do, but when you ask two twins—black guys from Louisiana—going to MIT with full paid scholarships, well, if they can do it I think I should be able to do it too.

So that's the way it worked out. Once I was in the MITES program, I knew I wanted to go to MIT. I was kind of concerned about the admission. My test scores—they were pretty good, but they weren't the 800's or the 700's that you think you need to get into these schools when you're applying as a senior in high school. I think I did pretty well. I think my performance in the MITES program really helped me get in, because when I got there I was pretty far behind a lot of students who were there. We took calculus and physics and chemistry and writing. A lot of people had already had calculus. I didn't know what it was. I failed my first MITES calculus mid-term. Through getting some help with the tutors and stuff, I finished as the most improved student in calculus and some other things. I think that really did a lot for my self-confidence, to let me know that I could compete on that level. After that, I just applied to MIT and once I got in—and especially once I got that scholarship—I knew I was going there.

So actually, the MITES program was a very important program for you in terms of preparing you to move ahead.
Yes. It's so funny that I met so many people in that program that I'm still in contact with today. A good friend of both of ours who goes to Berkeley was in that program with me. He wanted to come to MIT, but the financial aid situation wasn't right and he decided to come out here to Berkeley. We've been in contact, and since I've come out here now we hang out on a regular basis.

It's a great program.
It's a great program. They had a Bay Area, I guess—what was that thing? It was like a money fundraiser for MITES a while back. I wanted to make sure that I got a chance to go to that and at least speak to the administrators in the program and let them know and thank them for doing the work that they did.

We're at a point where we ought to bring in Kristala Jones, who is right here. Kristala, I'm not sure, you didn't come through the MITES program?
Kristala: No. I didn't know about MITES until after I was already at MIT.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886802/9780262286305_c007700.pdf by guest on 17 October 2021

You didn't come through Project Interphase.
I did go through Interphase.

Did you, Thane?
Thane: No, I didn't go through Interphase.

So let me jump to your impressions of your first year at MIT. What were significant highlights of that experience?
Kristala: I had a good time my freshman year. I did very well academically, and I was really surprised because I was not extremely confident, having come from Longview, Texas; it wasn't enough to have been valedictorian and have done really well, because I was just from Longview, Texas. I thought that there was a good possibility that I would fail out. But I knew if I did, I wasn't going back to Texas. It was a pride thing. If I did, I said, "I'll just go to BU or I'll go to Tufts or Northeastern, but I'm staying in Boston. As far as everybody back home knows, I'm still in school in Boston. I'm not going back home."

But freshman year was really important to me, because I did do very well both semesters. It gave me tremendous confidence for the rest of the time that I was there. I was also really surprised that I could find and get so rooted in the black community almost immediately. Interphase did help that a lot, being a program for underrepresented students. The three of us—my two roommates and I, who lived together freshman year in New House 212—had been in this Interphase program, so we already knew each other. That was really good because it took away all the stress of how you deal with people you never knew before sharing the same space in the first semester.

Freshman year is not really clear, for different reasons. It was a long time ago. It seems like it was a really long time ago. The things that are most distinct about it, besides me being really confident or building up my confidence because I had done really well, was how quickly and how well the upperclassmen helped. It was a few of them—some of them just didn't care and were doing their own thing, or were really horrible role models anyway. (Thane: Yes, I was going to say the same thing.) Those you ignored. But there were a couple who really kind of looked around and sought out those of us who they thought would be them in a couple of years. It started real early.

Even in the freshman year?
Oh, definitely in the freshman year.

Thane: We had a big freshman committee and all that stuff. Like I said, my experiences are probably a bit different from Kris's, but I think that I had fun my freshman year, in a couple ways. I'm the type of person who likes to go out and meet a lot of people. This was my first time away from home, so I definitely took advantage of that. But I also had fun in that this was the first time in my life where I could deal with people—I hate to say "on my level," but I could deal with people who had similar interests to me. I lived in a black neighborhood in high school and went to a white high school. I had my friends in the neighborhood at home. I could talk about shooting ball and the latest rap CD that came out, but I couldn't talk to them necessarily about this math problem I was having or some of the greater issues facing the race or whatever philosophical discussion you want to have. When I got to MIT, it was one of the first times that I had so much in common with so many people.

Across the board.
Not necessarily across the board, but it's definitely the black population. I lived in Chocolate City my entire four years at MIT. Like Kris, they had upperclassmen who were doing well who came up to you and either recognized that you had some potential or just liked you and wanted to help you negotiate the process. They took me under their wings and told me how to approach professors for UROP's, how to approach TA's and get them to help you with your homework. They did a lot of things like that, that you would pick up eventually in your career. But pointing out several key things for me, that really made all the difference in the world for me.

I guess it was probably slightly different from Kris. I did well my first year, but I didn't blow it out. I didn't get straight A's and I had to struggle. I think that struggle helped me out a lot too. I knew a lot of people who had come from these high schools who had had two years of calculus and physics and stuff, and they had a bit of an easier time than I did. But by the time sophomore year rolled around, their study habits hadn't been fully developed like I felt mine were. I had to study hard freshman year. I studied hard and I had fun also, but it was just weird for me that some of the people who breezed through freshman year were having a really, really, really tough time sophomore

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886802/9780262286305_c007700.pdf by guest on 17 October 2021

year because those study habits hadn't been fully developed. I came up and said I wasn't the brightest person MIT admitted, but I was going to be one of the hardest-working, if that's what it took to get me through the place.

What is the best thing about your experience at MIT and what would you consider some of the worst things about the experience?

Kristala: Overall? I think one of the best things was how hard I had to work. My first semester here in grad school, I'll never forget that, we had a class called 2.30. (I still do everything in numbers.) It was a math class, mathematical methods for chemical engineers. It was three problems. The first one was relatively straightforward and the second one, you could do it but it was really hard, and the third one was practically impossible. I said, "Cool." I did all of the first one, half of the second one, wrote about a line and a half on the third one. My classmates here, some of them were like, "Oh, this is just the hardest problem set I've ever had. I never had to work this hard when I was in undergrad"; I was like, "This is normal, this is standard." I think having gone through MIT, and having succeeded at MIT, I don't think there's anything that I would ever try to do that I can't do. The worst that could happen is that I'm going to have to work really, really hard to get it done, and I know how to do that and it didn't kill me.

I think the people at MIT were really good. Some of them weren't, but overall the people were good—going back to the people who kind of sought us out when we were freshmen. Some of us in our class—Thane and myself, among them—tried to return that favor and seek out other people as freshmen and sophomores as we went along. There were people who were genuine and who had real concern. I was really surprised to find out that there were people who had so much interest in giving back.

Quite honestly, when I graduated from high school, I was irritated and annoyed and a little bit bitter because I felt like I was carrying the weight of my entire town—or at least the fifty percent of the people who were black in that town—around with me. I graduated from high school as the first black valedictorian in my high school. People knew this was possibly going to happen after my first semester in high school, when I was a freshman. They tracked it, and teachers—black teachers—at the school knew, and people on the school board knew, and my pastor knew. Everywhere I went, people knew. Part of the time it was nice because you got encouragement; the other part of the time you felt like if you did anything wrong or anything bad it wasn't just that you would disappoint your mother, but you were going to disappoint somebody three blocks away whom you had never met before. I resented that a whole lot when I was leaving high school, that I felt like I had to take all this responsibility with me.

But the first year that I was at MIT, it stopped being a burden and it started being just a reality, something that I could take and turn into something good and productive in terms of things that I wanted to do. A lot of the programs that deal with NSBE, with working with high school students and with junior high school students, they were things that I really felt like I had to do, but I wasn't bitter about them as I would have been a year earlier. I think a lot of that was because of the other people who were doing those kinds of things—really listening to them and talking to them and understanding their reasons for why they were doing this and really turning it into a positive, as opposed to something that was going to put so much stress on you that you couldn't think about getting your work done. The work and the people, that's about it.

Thane: Well, it definitely wasn't the work for me. I'd have to say the best thing about MIT was my friends, the people I met. By friends, I include teachers, students, administrators—everybody, the network of people that I was able to interact with there I feel I wouldn't have gotten anywhere else in the world that I had gone to college. I think I could have gotten a quality education at other places—maybe not the quality of "an MIT education," as they like to tell us at the Institute—but it was just so good to me that I had friends there and we could do everything together. We studied together, we ate together, we fought together. The only group of people now that I consider close friends are the people I met then. Since I've gone to Stanford, I've met some more people that I would put in that boat.

By and large, it's the people I met and the things that they were able to instill in me. I think I tried to take a little bit of good and a little bit of bad sometimes from everyone. Yes, some of my

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886802/9780262286305_c007700.pdf by guest on 17 October 2021

good friends didn't do well academically, and part of that—a lot of that—I thought was their fault because they weren't as serious about their academics as they should have been. That's something I learned from them. Yes, I went out to parties, Kris likes to say "every party" in the greater Boston-Cambridge area, at one time or another. (Kristala: I didn't say that.) But I got my work done. I knew that was what I was there for. The people would be the best thing, and also—now that I'm in the work force—the brand name. That MIT brand name has helped me out tremendously. It's kind of unfair sometimes, but I'm glad I'm part of this elite club that has these magic rings that we wear. (Kristala: I'd rather be in than out.) It may not be fair, but there is, I think, an instant bit of credibility that is attached to me that I don't think is attached to some of my other friends, especially some of my other black friends who haven't gone through the Institute. When I got to Stanford, there were a couple other people—probably two other black people in my department—but I was one of the first ones they asked for help in forming a study group, because I went to MIT and they used to always want to ask me questions. "How was MIT? Was it really as hard as people say it is? Man, you must not have had any kind of social life going through there." They always wanted to ask me those questions and it even persists to this day.

I think that MIT brand name has been one of the most important things. I can go to one of the vice presidents of my company who is an MIT alum and we have something in common, and I have something to talk to him about, whereas someone else who might not have had that opportunity is probably a little bit further down the line than I am. So it's the brand name and the people, you know.

But I didn't hear the bad part.

I was about to get to that, and it's interesting. Kris and I, I think we had this discussion a while back. I'm not bitter about my experience at MIT. I know a lot of people who have gone through the Institute who can't stand it, would not recommend their children go there, would not recommend other students go there. I can understand it because MIT is hard and it puts you through a lot of stress and a lot of hell, but I like to borrow a quote and say, "What does not kill me, makes me stronger." But hey, it's like going to war. I would never ask to go to war, but once you've been through it with a group of people, you're stronger for it. I mean, once you've succeeded—once you've been through it—it's something that sticks with you for life. I mean, we've had conversations, particularly through some of our Bay Area black alumni MIT meetings, where we find people who have very different opinions about MIT. Everybody—well, I won't say everybody, but many of the people that I know, even some of the people who got their butts whipped going through there and had to take a couple of extra semesters or had all kinds of financial problems and extended themselves with loans to get that MIT degree—would do it again. I'd say many of them would do that again because they feel what the MIT degree gives to them is worth it.

So it's hard for me, when you ask me what's the worst thing. We had problems racially with perceptions of what our performance level should be at the Institute and we had social problems within the black community, but those things to me are minor. I look very fondly upon my four years at MIT. I can't really say that there's one real thing that sticks out in my mind as the worst—not enough sleep maybe, but that's about it.

In the "Intuitively Obvious" series, do you remember saying that black students come to the plate with two strikes against them?

Everything I said then, I still stick to. I think the problems, as you're going through them, seem a lot greater sometimes than they really are. I'm not discrediting the problems of black students at MIT, because there are problems, but we're at MIT. I know people who have got half their family members in jail and got other problems like that, so to me those problems are small. When you sit back and look at the greater picture, those problems are kind of small compared to some of the other greater life problems that some of the people I know are going through.

Yes, I would definitely say that there are some problems as far as dealing with black students at MIT. I still feel that we have a long way to go before we can achieve, I guess, "perceived equality" is a way I might try to term it. I think I'm equal and on the same performance level, or thought I was on the same performance level, as a lot of the students at the Institute—all other stu-

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886802/9780262286305_c007700.pdf by guest on 17 October 2021

dents at the Institute—but they didn't think I was on that level. And so that's the gap that's there. Until we can reach the point where that perceived equality is there and until they can look at me and say, "Thane, that was a smart guy. He did such and such and such and, by the way, he was a black guy too," I don't know if we'll ever reach that point. Would you say the same thing?

Kristala: I agree with most of the things that Thane said. When I really sit down and think about days and weeks and months or semesters that were really bad, I can't really blame it on MIT as an institution. I went to MIT between the ages of seventeen and twenty-one. I was going to have bad days. I was going to have bad weeks and I was going to have bad trimesters. It was just going to happen. It's a part of growing up. Most of the really bad times that I had there had more to do with individuals and personalities and the things you learn about growing up and dealing with people as distinct souls and characters. Some people are without integrity in all these types of issues. You can't blame that on MIT. If you deal with the betrayal of trust of a friend and that ruined your semester, that's not MIT's fault, that's your friend's fault for being a jerk.

I really think there are issues, there are problems. I also agree that when put into the proper context, compared to children starving in the streets, so what? People don't like you, so what? As long as the person sitting next to you not liking you doesn't translate into that professor unfairly failing you, so what? People are not going to like you. I actually think that one of the good things about MIT for me, having gone there at seventeen and come out an adult, is that I really learned how to live in a world where my work and my life were different. The people I work with in most cases now are not people I consider to be friends. They are people I work with because they don't understand me enough to really understand what my interests are and why those are my interests. They don't understand that I tutor on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons and then I end up going back to lab until midnight—not because I'm crazy, but because I have to tutor. I have to do something that I feel is really allowing me to contribute. And they just don't get it.

MIT allowed me to get used to that. I know people who went to HBCU's and had a really hard time dealing with culture shock when they came to Berkeley. I thought, "Hey, this is just par for the course, right? This is just the way things are." (Thane: Exactly.)

Thane and I have had this discussion many, many times over the past seven years, in terms of people—black people in non-white institutions—being lost. When magazines and when anybody deals with or tries to address the issue of black students, they immediately go to historically black colleges and universities, but then they get a lot of black students at one time as opposed to what's going on in other places. It's life. That's the way things go.

That doesn't mean that MIT doesn't have problems. There are definitely some people there who need to be checked, who need to really examine themselves and their opinions and their attitudes and the way they deal with people as individuals and not as what I consider to be a stereotypical whatever. But that's also a part of life. I think one of the good things, or not necessarily good but what was positive, was that we dealt with those issues. That stuff happened, and when it happened we dealt with it. We talked about it. Some of us, if it hurt enough, we cried about it. But we didn't just sit around and be sad and mad about it. We stood outside of Art Smith's office during finals week. (Thane: Right.) I mean, we really did.

You folks marched too, didn't you?

Yes, and that was good. It was constructive use of energy. This stuff is going to happen. I don't care if this is about to be the new millennium, people still walk around killing black people—not just talking about them, but killing them just because they felt like it. It happens at least once a year around here. Professors are extremely shocked and they're so sad and everything, or whatever. But those people who carry those same thoughts as those who ultimately end up perpetrating these terrible crimes are in every facet of our society and have the power and the potential to really manifest their views. We need to know how to deal with it when it happens.

I think we learned that, at least some of that, while we were there. It wasn't fun, but it's a matter of how do you take the things that are not enjoyable and turn them into a lesson that you can learn and a skill that you can use for the rest of your life? When you leave, you're twenty-one or

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886802/9780262286305_c007700.pdf by guest on 17 October 2021

you're twenty-two; you've still got living to do and changes to make.

Thane: I definitely want to add to what Kris said about that. I came to Stanford. I hadn't visited Stanford. I had talked to a couple of professors over the phone, but I knew—people said, "Aren't you concerned about the environment there?" I said, "Look, if I can get through MIT for four years, in Stanford it's sunny. I know I can get through there for two years. If I've got to survive on my own, that's okay. I know how to adjust."

Also, Kris mentioned something about how she doesn't necessarily have a social life with the people whom she works with. That's been something that's kind of hard for me to deal with. It's something I'm sort of going through right now. I've found that a lot of the people, since I've come into the corporate world, those social relationships persist at work. I have to try to take it upon myself to get into those social loops in order for me to be able to succeed and do the things I need to do at work sometimes. It's kind of hard because you have completely different interests from these people and you try to find some common ground somewhere. But it's a fine line you have to walk because, yes, this is your co-worker; yes, this is someone you want to have a good relationship with—"But I'm not going and spilling my soul to this person and telling them everything I feel about everybody in the office," because I know. I've learned through some of my experience at MIT and at Stanford that that's not a wise thing to do. That can come back to haunt you. Walking that fine line, between how far you go to advance your career and to make sure you're in the loop socially and professionally, is hard.

It's one of the things that I'm dealing with now on a daily basis. Okay—we can go out to lunch and I'll go out with them and have a beer and stuff, or we'll go hit golf balls at the golf range or whatever. They want to come out with me, but I'm not going to one of the little pubs in Palo Alto. That's not what I do. "You want to come out with me? I'll take you to Oakland and I'll take you to the places where I hang." Now that's me. It's hard for them to deal with that a lot of times because it's that whole thing, "You're not like the rest of them." Well, what does that mean? I like Snoop Doggy Dog and Tupac Shakur and whatever, but I also open my mind and listen to different things. My mind is not closed. I'm willing to try and accept and at least consider other things, but I'm not going to steer away from the core of who I am.

A lot of times that's what their expectations are. "Oh, Thane plays golf. Thane does this. Thane knows about wine, and we like that, too. I wouldn't expect him to know that." But I also know about hip-hop. I have black art in my home, and when you come you're going to see black art in my home. Whether or not you're offended by some of the images, I'm sorry, but that's who I am (Kristala: You ain't sorry.)—I'm sorry you're offended, but I can't do nothing about it. Walking that line is difficult.

The two of you bring up another issue that I wanted you to comment on. There's a much older MIT black alumnus who made a statement to me—in fact, this week—that he wanted to talk because he didn't understand all this thing about this Chocolate City. He just didn't understand why there had to be a Chocolate City—"That's just not the way we ought to be doing things." If you had to try to explain to someone your position on Chocolate City, what would you say?

Thane: Can I start? Well, I lived there four years. I'm not going to say that Chocolate City is black people's heaven at MIT; it's not that. But what it is, it's just like there's a Russian House where people have a group of common interests, come together, and immerse themselves in an environment that they feel comfortable in. The traditional MIT environment is not one that I as a seventeen-year-old student from Opelousas, Louisiana, living in a black neighborhood, was comfortable taking part in. One of the things that I think Chocolate City added for me was what I talked about earlier—role models. I wouldn't have met those role models living in some of the other places in the dorm. Yes, as black people no matter where you live at MIT, you have some common experience or you think you have some common experience to share. You feel offended when you see that black person in the hall and you give them "the nod" and they don't give you the nod back.

Then there is this whole thing about people thinking they're better than you or something else. How many people are at MIT—fifteen, twenty-five hundred undergraduates? (Kristala: Forty-five hundred.) Forty-five hundred undergraduates, it's been a while. If you were the only black there, you didn't have a choice. *You* would be Chocolate City

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886802/9780262286305_c007700.pdf by guest on 17 October 2021

because you were the only person there. But, given the opportunity to share in experiences with other people who are going through the same things that you're going through, it made my life a lot easier and I was able to mobilize and do things a lot quicker when issues came up.

Was it always the best academic environment? No, I'll be quite honest about that. But I think my academic education at MIT was secondary to my social education. I grew as a person in those four years. I would have grown as a person anywhere else in the country, but the traits and the characteristics that I have today I owe a lot to the people who are in this group of twenty-eight black men who talked about black entrepreneurship and black empowerment, who talked about social issues, who talked about blending the corporate life with your social life. We talked about this since I was a freshman in college, so things were not as much of a shock to me when I got out in the "real world" and had to deal with things.

So I would tell this person, "I understand your reservations, because to someone who doesn't understand—when you tell them you live in some place called Chocolate City—some people might take offense to that. 'What are you calling yourself? At least come up with a better name for it.'" But you know, part of the reason why the name has stuck is because there is this defiance—we don't care what you think. This is what we're going to do. I remember when I was there, we had several debates to change the name to the Ronald McNair House, the Robert Taylor House, something else that some people felt was more fitting—a more fitting name for us being at such an institution. But it was always defeated because people said, "Part of the reason why we call ourselves Chocolate City is because there are some things they don't understand. They don't understand the name. We're not going to go back and change and backtrack just because people have a problem with it." It's that self-reliance and that stubbornness that sort of persists in me, at least, to this day.

And you still feel strongly about it, right?

Oh, very strongly. I'm still on the Chocolate City e-mail list at MIT. I interact with the younger guys. I know a lot of them by their user names. I've never seen them. One guy sent an e-mail out to the list. He was having some problems with the CAP, the Committee on Academic Performance. He got fifty e-mails from alums telling him, "Look, we know what you're going through. We wish you the best. We wish you support in what you're doing." It's a group of people that I feel really strongly about. I would tell anybody to this day, the MIT experience—the MIT black experience—without Chocolate City to me is hard to imagine.

Kristala: I lived in Chocolate Suburbs, right next door to Chocolate City. I have to say that I do understand the reservations that some people have about an institution like Chocolate City and like New House II—we call it Chocolate Suburbs, where I lived—that grew up around Chocolate City. When I came into New House II, there were about fifty or fifty-five students there and maybe about twenty were black. When I left my senior year, maybe three were not black. That was over four years. It was dramatic. It was really, really dramatic.

I moved to Texas when I was nine, from Michigan. I remember going into class on the first day as a fifth-grader in Texas. First period homeroom, there were three other black kids in the class and they were all sitting together. The teacher put everybody in alphabetical order in chairs. Then we went to lunch, and the black kids were over here and the white kids were over there. We went outside for recess, and the black kids played over here and the white kids played over there. I had come from Michigan where, granted it's not a utopia, those separations where I had gone to school weren't so distinct. But I had a mirror at home and it wasn't hard for me to decide whether to go play with the black kids or play with the white kids or eat lunch with the black kids or eat lunch with the white kids. And when I went to high school, I was in honors classes and in most of my classes there were at most three other black students out of twenty-five or thirty kids. I was in organizations and all these clubs and stuff where I had all these interactions with white kids.

I do just restrict the discussion to black and white because that's what my high school was. There wasn't a lot of diversity in it. Yet when there were parties or social events on the weekend, there were black parties and there were white parties. There were a couple, literally like two people, who would cross those lines and go back and forth. It was essentially very restricted to the point that two years after I graduated from high

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886802/9780262286305_c007700.pdf by guest on 17 October 2021

school—two to five years, it had been a few years—my mother called me and told me that they were having two proms. The state track championships were the same day as the prom for my high school. Our 4x100 team had qualified for state. There were four black boys on the team. Three of them were seniors and they wanted to go to the prom. When they qualified for state, they asked the prom committee whether they would move prom up or back a weekend. And they said, "No." The parents got mad and said, "Fine, we'll have a prom for our own kids." I heard that it turned out to really be kind of just like a party, but a lot of black students basically boycotted the prom because of that.

So basically, having to make a choice as to where you were going to go and who you were going to be with was something I had been doing for nearly ten years before I went to college. I made that same choice as soon as I got there, to seek out my people and to form a community and to be a part of a community. Now, as a graduate student, where I really am not living on campus and although we still have organizations and we still have communities, it's more difficult. For the first time in my life, I have a friend—or someone whom I can call a friend—who's not black. I won't say the first time—the first time since I was nine and left Michigan. There was a little white girl named Julie when I was in Michigan in elementary school, and that girl was part of my little circle. But this is the first time I've had a friend who wasn't black. And I think that had I been forced to live outside of an environment like Chocolate City or New House, maybe that would have happened sooner.

Now, having said all of that, I would fight to keep Chocolate City. I would fight and I would never say I had any reservations about it to anybody who was trying to close it down. I would never support not letting students choose where they want to live, not letting students create something like New House II. Chocolate City is an independent living group, so they choose who lives there. Where I lived, we were part of the campus dorm system and so people selected whether they wanted to live there. There was a lottery system to see who wanted to live where, and it evolved kind of just with these natural forces.

But I would fight to keep it. I think it's very important because, yes, on the one hand I might have learned how to deal with these relationships easier, but on the other hand I might have had to hurt somebody or myself. Some of the things that happened around there, some of the things that you dealt with around there, when you went home you didn't want to see any white folks. It wouldn't have been a good thing had you seen white folks, because you would have scared them.

I've got a friend who was like a half-inch away from being kicked out of the Institute in East Campus. He was on the phone in his dorm and he had left his CD's or his albums or something like that out in the lounge. This white kid from down the hall just got mad about it and put his stuff in a trash can and set it by his door. He came outside, found his stuff in the trash can, and he went and kicked the boy's door in. He didn't touch him, but scared him really, really badly.

You don't need that. It's hard enough to have to go to class and not have people to study with because people don't believe in your abilities. It's hard enough to go to class and know that whatever you do or say—or don't do or don't say—is going to be remembered, because it's not hard to figure out who the little black girl in class is. You live at MIT; you go to school at MIT and it becomes your whole life. It's enough to have to deal with all that for twelve hours out of the day or sixteen hours of the day. When you go home and go to sleep, you want to be able to put rollers in your hair and have people understand what this is all about. You really do. You don't want to have people wondering how your hair transforms when you wash it. It's just enough.

And Thane was talking about it. It wasn't always the most positive academic environment, and I think that's just part of being in college. I don't think that is a result of there being so many black students, but I think we always try to hold ourselves to a higher standard. I think we were harder on ourselves when we were in a situation where it didn't. But you're away from home for the first time and there are things you probably shouldn't do, and things you probably should do. I understand why people have reservations about it, but I would go back to MIT and fight to keep Chocolate City.

Thane: I just had one other thing to add. MIT is just a microcosm of society. I don't know too many neighborhoods where we have black folks

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886802/9780262286305_c007700.pdf by guest on 17 October 2021

and white folks living in harmony right next to each other. I'm not saying they don't exist, but not in most. I've been in a lot of places in the country and there's a black section, there's a white section, there's a Hispanic section, there's an Italian section, there's an Irish section. Is it necessarily the best thing in the world? I don't know, but that's how things to me tend to naturally evolve sometimes. You want to be around the people you're most comfortable with, the people who eat the same type of food you do, listen to the same type of music you do, whatever. That's where you want to be when you go home.

Home means comfort. I'm not going to go be the only person in this hostile environment, what I perceive many times to be a hostile environment, and being this bastion of enlightenment for them so that they can go and say, "I lived next to this black person in college, so I know about black people." I think what's driving a lot of what's going on is this need to say that. There's a facade of diversity, I think, that would exist by just forcing people to intersperse with each other. Kris talked about if I had to come home after seeing *Mississippi Burning* or *Rosewood* or something, some movie that's going to really upset me, and then explain to all these white people why I'm upset. That might not be the best time for me to do that.

Kristala: Can you imagine having been any place but Chocolate City during the L.A. Riots? (Thane: That's tough, man.) I remember being in the dorm and I remember my neighbor. I had just gotten home and, when the verdict was handed down and things went crazy, having her open the door asking me had I heard. I remember all these discussions that we had for days. And that would not have been a good time to be around white people in the dorms. I can't imagine having been any place else but an environment like New House when all of that happened. It just would not have been pretty.

This was 1994.
This was '92, April.

This was the videotaped beating of Rodney King, right?
Yes, brother man got beat down in the streets in Los Angeles and they had it on tape. They had all kinds of evidence, crazy mountains of evidence.

Thane: Ebonically speaking.

Kristala: Ebonically speaking. I live in Oakland, so I'm down with the Ebonics.

Then they want to know why people riot.
Then they want to know why. It's so funny. I just have to say this. It doesn't have anything to do with this, but I just read this in an old *Newsweek* I had where they had a quote from this guy in South Central Los Angeles. He said he was glad when the second O. J. Simpson verdict happened, when the whole trial was over, because "I was afraid white folks was going to riot."

That's funny.
I laughed about it and then I stopped and said, "Yeah, they probably would have." After that was when we had that march.

Thane: That's when we had that march that we organized, was it to Boston Common? (Kristala: Boston Common.) The Boston Common.

We actually got flack from some of the other black student organizations in the Boston area because we really went about organizing that whole thing, I think, the wrong way. We tried to get everybody involved too early. Then we had too many chiefs and not enough people just doing what they needed to do to take care of business.

Everybody comes with a different viewpoint: "We need to shout," "We need to be silent," "We need to get a permit," "We need to just storm the streets." You definitely had different viewpoints on what actions needed to take place, but we got—I won't say a lot of flack—some flack from some of the other student organizations because we organized the silent protest and marched from MIT silently to Boston Common. They felt what we were saying was that we were above the people who were rioting, when in actuality what we were trying to say at least was, "It's so obvious that we shouldn't have to riot." Anyone—black, white, Hispanic, whatever, who saw what went on and wasn't upset when those verdicts came up, had problems. That's what we were trying to say—"We don't need to riot and we don't need to be vocal to show how upset we are." It's something that should be inherent. It's a human nature thing, not really a race thing. We had some problems dealing with that.

You came through the place. You now have had several years of experiences outside of MIT. If you had a chance, what suggestions would you make to MIT of ways to

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886802/9780262286305_c007700.pdf by guest on 17 October 2021

improve or enhance the experience of blacks at MIT, given what you know now?

Kristala: You have to go in the lab and build a magic chamber and put all the racists and the bigots and jackasses in the chamber on one side and they come out nice people, ready to give you a chance, so we can all get along. I still have the same belief that I had. My senior year I went to a Faculty Policy Committee meeting—to a couple of them—where they showed a copy of the thirty-minute version of the "Intuitively Obvious" tapes. At that time the chairman was a physics professor, Jaffe. Bob Jaffe was the chair of the Faculty Policy Committee. He struck me as somebody who seemed genuinely interested in trying to see what was really going on or, at the very least, he was willing to entertain ideas.

I went, and Judy Jackson from the Office of Minority Education, and this white guy who was on the Graduate Student Council. I still don't understand why he was there. He didn't say a whole lot. What I said to them then, and what I still believe now, is that you have so many really bright and enormously talented people there. Race and dealing with race in our society is so much a part of this country—the fabric of it and who we are and what we are and what we can and what we will do—that it's a shame not to discuss it with people who are going to be in a position to lead by example. What I felt then, and what I still feel, is that the problem that we have—or one of the major issues we have in terms of dealing with race—is that people won't talk about it, or people don't want to be honest about it. When you talk about it, you don't want to say anything that's going to hurt anybody's feelings, so you're not saying what's really on your mind. And that doesn't help anybody.

J. J. had come in with an idea for having these dinners in different living groups where the professors came and talked, just kind of had dinner with students. Her thought was that we just need to be able to deal with each other as people and learn that professors are just humans and not gods, and everybody could all get along. I didn't disagree completely with that, but I didn't agree wholly with it either because dealing with or looking at professors as being intimidating is not because of race. I mean, I'm a graduate student now where there's three black students out of a department of about a hundred and twenty. Most of the graduate students around there are intimidated by some of the professors when they first come in. We had dinner with prospective students last night and we were talking about this whole intimidation factor. Until you really do have a working relationship with them, they're always going to be viewed as these sort of intimidating people because they know so much more than you do.

I didn't think that was really at the heart of it. My suggestion was—you can have dinner or you don't have to have dinner, but let's talk. Let's be real honest and let's ask hard questions and get honest answers from that. The BSU had done that one time with course professors or something, where there ended up being only about three or four professors who came. Everybody kind of mingled for a little while and then we finally stopped and had to facilitate the discussion. The questions were like, "Do you have lower expectations of black students than you have of other students?" (Thane: "Yes, I do. You're going to get a C.") Right: "I know you." Or questions like, "Do you feel that black students don't participate in the discussions in your class?" There were all these types of questions.

But I think what is really at the heart of the matter is that some people are going to be racist and prejudiced. We know this because we're not stupid and because we have parents and grandparents who lived in a time when that was common. People would like us to think that was many, many moons ago, when they didn't have televisions and newspapers or even written and verbal communication, but my mother went to a segregated high school until she was a junior. That's not all that long ago. Quite honestly, my natural inclination is not to trust you because I know that it may not have been you, but people who look like you have done things and set out to do things to people who look like me just because they think it's fun or just because they think they have a right to do this. So why am I going to do anything but not trust you? Why am I going to build my house of cards and lay everything out and wait for you to tell me that you don't think I belong here? My natural reaction is for me to distrust you and your natural reaction may be to think that I'm less capable. Let's really talk about it.

At this Faculty Policy Committee meeting, I kind of brought this up and one professor said, "Well, that sounds like something where you would

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886802/9780262286305_c007700.pdf by guest on 17 October 2021

only have a discussion with minority students and with professors." My response was, "No, it needs to happen with all students, because the same issues come up when you're trying to form study groups." Like Thane was talking about, he would like somebody to say that he was a smart guy.

I will never forget this. My freshman year at MIT someone wrote an article in *The Tech*—(Thane: The article by SWAME, Straight White American Males? Kristala: Yes, it was a SWAME article. Thane: I still have a copy of it.)—talking about "straight white American males" getting ready to be this minority and how all these minorities were coming into MIT and all these places on these full scholarships and taking the places of other people. I was pissed for a couple of reasons. Number one, I was trying to figure out where was all this money I was supposed to have.

Because you weren't getting it, right?

No. Where is my full scholarship? All this money is out there and I took something from you? Where is my money? Obviously, somebody has shortchanged me on my money. The other thing is that I knew that one person had said it and put it into words and put it into print. How many other people were thinking this?

So the very next day, I go to class and I'm looking around just trying to see who's going to look me in the eye. It's the same thing. We as black students need to be able to say, "This is what we're feeling," and we need to ask white students—"Be honest with us"—and to ask if that's how we're feeling. "Okay, now let's compare SAT scores. Let's compare grades that I got in 18.01 versus grades that you got in 18.01 or 8.02. Let's look at whether or not I'm capable. Let's do an integral. Let's talk about what we're thinking and what we're feeling." And this one professor said, "Well, what if that's how they feel?" I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "What if professors really do feel you're less capable?" I said, "At least we'd know we ain't paranoid."

I think MIT has a responsibility, especially now. The whole O. J. Simpson thing has really been amusing to me because of the fact that everyone is so shocked and surprised that it was just different—the reality. "My gosh, justice is not blind?" People are just really, really shocked and amazed. It's like, "Okay, let's take this opportunity to really have open and honest discussions. Let me talk about what pisses me off and why I still don't trust you and why I won't trust you. It was my mother and it was my grandmother, and it was your mother and it was your grandmother. I know what my grandmother went through and your grandmother probably ignored her and figured that she wasn't human. Your grandmother probably said something to your mother who said something to you, and I'm sure—whether or not you have ever spoken it—that you have some questions. Why not just put it out and see who's left standing?"

Thane: I think about the question that you asked. I've been thinking since Kris has been talking, and that's a tough question. I agree with everything that she said to a point. I don't know if you'd call it cynicism or what, but I don't think people are going to reach the point where we can have these frank and honest discussions—not everyone. I think there always has been a subset of people who you can have these honest discussions with and these honest interactions with, but that's only after they've passed five or ten or fifteen different tests. It's like, that's not something that I'm going to discuss with my professor honestly or openly because of the fact that this man has, in effect, my destiny in his hands.

On a peer level, perhaps, that's something that can be addressed, but from an institutional standpoint, what can MIT do to help make the environment better for black people? About the only thing I can say is, provide the support and the resources and administrators and faculty who we can talk to about these problems, and make sure they're always there. If you leave, and Ann Davis Shaw leaves, and Margo leaves, and Ike leaves, and everybody leaves, I'm concerned about what's going to happen to the students there. I use you guys as those resources for those situations that I think are always going to come up.

Fortunately, I had an outlet. Whenever these situations came up I could talk, I had someone to talk to. Sometimes it was an upperclassman, sometimes it was Kris, sometimes it was an administrator—but I at least had an outlet. I don't think there is anything that MIT can do institutionally to change people's preconceived notions when they come into the Institute. I think all the Institute can do is allow people to have a way to either vent these feelings or discuss these feelings. Now, if you want to discuss these feelings with other people—

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886802/9780262286305_c007700.pdf by guest on 17 October 2021

black folks, white folks, Hispanic folks—maybe that is something that we need to do. But don't cut off all my resources, don't not let me have an opportunity to talk to people about the problems that I'm going through. Make sure you have minority faculty, minority administrators, minority students there who I can commiserate with and talk to and who can give me advice and question my beliefs and ideas, because that's the only way that I'm going to grow as a person. That's the only way some of my ideas are going to change—if somebody questions them, if somebody I respect questions them.

I could have someone—we call them the old redneck from down in Louisiana—pass by and shout "Nigger" at me. That doesn't affect me anymore. It does, but I'd like to say that he just doesn't know any better, even though I know he probably should know better than that. But when I get to MIT and we have people walking down Amherst Alley still getting "Nigger" yelled at them, and the Institute doesn't believe it because we didn't have a voice recognition device to positively identify the person who did it, that's when I feel that people feel resentment towards the Institute.

I'm not asking you to change your recruitment policy and I'm not asking you to change your academic rigor. I'm not asking you to change any of the things that make MIT, MIT. If things get to the point where we're going to try to bring them to the administration—if we feel things are so bad that we have to step this up to higher people within the administration of the Institute—that's something that we couldn't handle, that we feel that we couldn't handle on our own. There's a lot of that stuff that we handle on a personal level and never talk about and never see. It was something that was a constant theme in the "Intuitively Obvious" videos. We don't want to go around and protest. I don't want to take time out from finals week to go yell in front of Dean Art Smith's office. I have better things to do. I could be studying. I could be watching TV, hanging out and relaxing.

But whenever things come up, I feel someone has to bring them to people's attention, so that potentially there's even one person we can change or one person who says, "Why are they doing this? What's going on?"—someone who can have some kind of open dialogue and say, "Well, this is what we're thinking. This is what we feel. You may not agree with it, but I just want to let you know what's going on." If those things are not there, then that's when I think that the students begin to suffer more.

I have two quick questions. The next to the last question is related to the last one you just responded to. Based on your own experience, is there any advice you might offer to other black students who are about to enter the MIT environment?

Kristala: You know, it's really strange. I guess part of the assumption is that I just came earlier today from talking to a group of young girls about college and those things. I think there are a lot of things that could be said, but I don't think anybody would listen. It's really bad because I'm starting to take that attitude where I feel like, "Why am I even bothering to go talk to people who aren't going to listen?" But you do it anyway because the mamas ask you to. Part of the reason they're not going to listen is because seventeen-year-olds, eighteen-year-olds think they already know everything. Remember the class of '95? When we were sophomores, the class of '95 came in as freshman and decided they knew everything. (Thane: Everything about how to succeed at MIT.) Yes. They knew how to get through MIT and the rest of us who were already there didn't know anything. They formed this little group called Obsidian. Remember Obsidian? (Thane: I remember that.) They were going to have all these little phone trees and study partners and all this kind of stuff. (Thane: They were going to tutor each other in classes that they were taking.) Right. They "was goin' be bad," they "was getting ready to knock it out." They were going to do things that had never been done before. I remember telling one of the leaders of Obsidian, "When you stumble and fall on your face, come talk to me and I'll pick you up." He came back a few weeks later to say what happened.

It's hard to give people advice on what to do and how to go through MIT right now because they really aren't going to listen, part of it being because they think they know everything. But I think more is that a lot of this stuff I don't think people would believe us if we told them. So much of it has to be put into the proper context. You can't describe how your emotions run from the first day that you go to MIT to the day that you graduate thinking that you got away with something. I just remember walking up to the lineup in

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886802/9780262286305_c007700.pdf by guest on 17 October 2021

the Athletic Center and this friend of mine said, "Don't you feel like you just pulled off the biggest con of your life? They're getting ready to give you a degree and you can't build jack you were supposed to be able to build or solve the problems you're supposed to be able to solve." I'm like, "Yeah, but I'm not turning back."

The other thing, I guess, is that my perspective now—looking back at some of the same things that happened, the exact same situation—is so different now because it seems like things that you realized, the further you get away from it, how insignificant it is in totality. It's important because it contributes to your growth as an individual and it's an important way for you to discover who you are and who you want to be and whether or not those are equivalent, but it's not as important as the business which has to be done in your lifetime.

I think that, first of all, the people who can give the most advice to students are the ones who are still there and a little bit older than them. They're more likely to believe them because they can see them. The problem that kids have, and I had it too, is that you think that things change so much in a few years—the people who graduated a few years before you, it's all different now. (Thane: They call us "old heads.") Right, exactly. And the "old heads" don't know because everything is just so different. I guess to answer the question—to answer a quick question with a quick answer, finally—there are a lot of things that I could say, but if I had an opportunity there is very, very little that I would say. I would rather say, "Call me if you need me." I think that's probably the most important thing that I can think of.

Thane: I would definitely say having access to us when you need us and being able to relate. I think the best thing I can do to help them is to succeed. If you tell me about this gentleman who is overseeing these three labs in NASA and was a black graduate of MIT in 1970 or so, hey, he doesn't need to tell me anything. What he's doing, that speaks loudly enough. Given the opportunity, I would like to be able to talk to him and find out what happened—some of the things that he's gone through—but that's me taking the initiative to contact him because he has knowledge that I need, that I want. If you translate that to what's happening at the Institute level, the freshmen coming in, I only think you really learn from other people when you go out and seek and you feel they have something to give you.

When we come every year to the Minority Spring Weekend, we have this discussion where we tell them about life at MIT and what's going on and let them ask all these questions or whatever. The same questions get asked every year and a lot of times the same answers get given every year. But is it really effective? I really don't know.

A quick example is someone I know who came to MIT and who had potential. Everybody thought this guy had tremendous potential. He talked the game and talked about getting advice from us. He would come up to you and get advice from you, "How did you do it? How did you succeed?" But he wasn't taking care of his business on the academic end. He was doing seven hundred different extracurricular groups—be it NSBE, BSU, or whatever. He asked, "How did you succeed at MIT?" I said, "Simple, I studied." It wasn't that hard for me. You put in the effort necessary for you to get the grades that you think you want. Don't tell me you're not doing well, you're not doing well in school, but you're in six different clubs, president of this organization, running track, doing this, doing that. You're not taking care of your business. Number one, you've got to take care of your business.

If someone would listen to me, that's the advice I would give them—realize what you're there for and take care of your business. But I'm sort of like Kris. Unless it's initiated on their level and they feel that they need to know that, I don't know how effective it's going to be. But I don't think that means we quit telling them.

Kristala: We're going to tell them anyway.

Thane: We're going to tell them anyway.

Kristala: We have a reception in April for the new students and we'll tell them. They're not going to listen, but we'll tell them anyway.

That's good. There are lots of other questions I could ask, but is there any comment you want to make before we close? There may be something that I missed or some other area you want to say something about.

I can't think of anything. It's just interesting that you brought up that "Intuitively Obvious" videotape. While I still stick by everything that I said, it's just interesting—when you brought it up—that I couldn't even remember what a lot of things I said

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886802/9780262286305_c007700.pdf by guest on 17 October 2021

were. It just seems that when you're going through it, it's a big problem. But once you've done it and you've moved on to other things—you know, I have other problems. I've got performance review coming up in three weeks at work. That's my big consideration, that's my big problem. So the recency of the issue seems to dictate how finely or how much you're able to remember it.

I hear that, and I also could say that the thing I remember about yours was, "And we don't have them anymore." That's something she was saying.
Kristala: I don't even remember what that was.

It was about these role models, remember that?
The black faculty, yes. I still feel very strongly about that, but you want to hear something funny and talk about perspective. One of the comments I made on that videotape was about not having black faculty. I had made the comment about not having black faculty. Berkeley actually uses MIT as an example of the need for black faculty. In the College of Engineering, there is a grand total of zero black faculty at Berkeley.

In the entire School of Engineering?
In the entire College of Engineering. The College of Chemistry, which is what I'm in, has departments of chemistry and chemical engineering, and there is a black professor in chemistry who has been there for I don't how many years. He's an associate dean of the college now, so he's been there for a while. There are effectively no black professors in engineering at all at UC Berkeley, and one in the sciences.

It was so funny to me that they were using MIT as an example. They wanted to know how many black faculty were over at MIT, and I just got tickled. I still think it is important and I wish that Paula Hammond had been on the faculty in Course X before I left. I'm planning to talk to her when I go to Boston in a few weeks. It's unfortunate that we don't have the same opportunities to really hear what those experiences are, but that's life.

Well, you folks have been very consistent as usual. I really thank you. I must tell you, though, before I end, that the "Intuitively Obvious" videotapes are really being used. The value of those comments that all of you made probably is the biggest influence on all of the things we've done in terms of race relations at that institution since you've left. It's the basis under which the Committee on Race Relations was established, and they now claim them to an extent. It's good that we have that marked up there as to who those folks who started it are.

Again, in the long run you'll find that white folks will be trying to take that and claim that as well. I think your faces will be hard to obscure. You really did show tremendous leadership in putting that piece together in a way that could have been totally different. I know we spent hours talking about what was the best way to do it, and you are the ones who decided how you wanted to do it. And it's a major, major influence. In fact, I even use it in my seminar as well as presentations that I make to new supervisors at the institution. They're just astonished about it. It's a very effective piece.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/1886802/9780262286305_c007700.pdf by guest on 17 October 2021