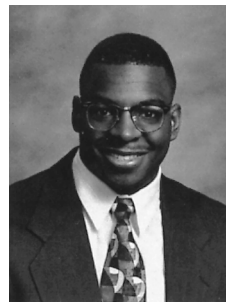


MATTHEW J. TURNER

SB 1996 (mechanical engineering), SB 1999 (political science) MIT; officer, US Air Force, 1996– ; stationed in Ramstein, Germany, since 1997; duty director of intelligence, 1997–1998; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance operations officer, 1998–1999; Kosovo strike assessment team chief, 1999; chief of training, 32nd Air Intelligence Squadron, 1999– ; president, MIT class of 1996; recipient, Minority Community Leadership Award, 1996; member, MIT Corporation, 1998– ; founder, Mentorshape Program, 1998.



I am the youngest of ten children. We've always had a very strong support structure. My parents are very hardworking. My dad, ever since I can remember him, worked three jobs. He worked one job during the day, one job at night, and usually one job on the weekends. He impressed on me the image of a hard worker meeting his goals. At the time, I didn't appreciate it, but now, looking back, it has been invaluable. He taught me that when it was time to get things done, hard work and drive would get the job done. My dad was always that kind of model for me.

My mother was always one of my best friends. She knew what I was thinking and how I felt at most times. A lot of times she pushed me to reach the goals I had set for myself, even when times were tough. That really helped me get going. She has always been unconditionally supportive of my endeavors. To her I owe my sense of compassion, my spiritual growth, my confidence, and my desire to accomplish God's will.

I grew up in Amityville, Long Island, a distant suburb of New York City. I grew up in a black neighborhood. We were bused to the neighboring Copiague school district, majority white. All of my extra- and co-curricular activities were in Copiague, but I lived in Amityville. The dramatic difference between the two neighborhoods, so geographically close, could not be more profound.

My family was very loving, supportive, and caring. I guess the earliest thing I can remember, to highlight that, is that I wanted to play a sport when I was in second grade. Without hesitation, my parents granted my request. Joining soccer was

one of the most defining points in my life. I was the only black on a team of about twenty kids. As early as I can remember, second grade, I heard comments like, "Hershey bar, chocolate bar, tar baby"—different things, a lot of things I was able to kind of ignore only because I had distinguished myself as one of the hardest workers on the team. Eventually, I became one of the best players on the team. I painfully ignored the derogatory comments because the coach really had a lot of confidence in me. As we grew older, these comments subsided, lending credence to the idea that racism starts in the home. I became really close friends with many of my teammates. I remained close friends with these guys until a dramatic incident took place in the seventh grade.

Over the years, the camaraderie of the team transcended racial issues. However, racism reared



Matthew Turner meets Vice President Albert Gore, principal speaker, MIT Commencement, June 1996.

Edited and excerpted from an oral history interview conducted by Clarence G. Williams with Matthew J. Turner in Cambridge, Massachusetts, 30 July 1996.

its ugly head again as I tried out for the junior high school team. I earned the starting center position. One of my teammates did not take that well, and though we had been friends up until that point, he angrily called me “stupid nigger.” This was unacceptable at our new “mature” age, and I let him know that as we fought it out. Oddly enough, many of my buddies from the past did not react positively towards me after that. I no longer felt the camaraderie. I decided to retire my dreams of being the next Pele and instead I would try my lot on the football field. That began my football career that spanned up to my senior year at MIT. Looking back, that was the first and only time that I would let racism alter my dreams.

I was not the only person surprised by the ugly face of racism. I think my mother had predicted I would see it eight years prior when she brought me to that first soccer practice and saw that I was the only black person there. But since I was so excited and so oblivious to all the racism stuff, I think she just kind of let it go and just let me play. But then when I came back in the seventh grade, I think it was kind of like a full circle. She gave me a lot of advice that if she had given me earlier, I wouldn't have appreciated. But I was able to look back on the experiences and see that, as a person, I couldn't tolerate those kinds of things, and that I should expect those things in society because society is not perfect. Mom's wise decision to let me form my own opinions about society resulted in a deep lesson that I would take with me the rest of my life.

Since the father of one of my good friends was also the coach and a Boy Scout leader, I eagerly agreed to join the Boy Scouts in the fifth grade. Outdoor activities like fishing and hunting intrigue me, so I knew scouting would be a natural fit. Most of my friends from the soccer team were also Boy Scouts. I got involved with Boy Scouts, and one of the things I initially found that was striking was that we didn't go outside as much as I thought we would. Instead, we did a lot of group meetings centered around the principles of the scout oath and promise—a lot of obligatory things that I guess at the time I didn't appreciate, but now I really do. I felt I would do well at scouting because many of the advancement opportunities were based on one's initiative. My buddies and I kind of challenged each other to do

as best as we could, and we tried to get as many awards as possible.

Out of the forty kids, there were about eight of us who were black. We were dispersed throughout, and there really weren't many of us. Again, by the time I had reached the pinnacle of scouting, the Eagle rank, I had endured many racist and derogatory comments from my peers and even from some of the adult supervisors, who I remember at one point doubted I would ever have a chance to make Eagle rank. Again, the hard work principle from my dad, my mom's encouragement, and my previous lesson had already made Eagle rank a huge goal of mine.

Tell me about your high school and about people who were very influential in your life as you went through high school.

Copague High School was probably about thirty-five percent black, fifty percent white, and fifteen percent Hispanic and other. The school did not have many overt racist incidents, so we were deemed a model school for other schools on Long Island. Student performance was consistently rated near the bottom of the county. However, the academic offerings were not limited. I was able to take five advanced placement courses my senior year. However, only five or ten percent of the students even had the opportunity to take these courses, and I was one of the few blacks. I guess that ten to twenty percent of the students went on to college. The school offered many activities and sports to all students—a tremendous opportunity to learn to be a leader. I participated in the gambit of activities, from student-faculty governance issues to wrestling team captain. Consequently, I had several different circles of friends and mentors.

Though I was very driven, each of my teachers influenced me by forcing me to explore my love of learning in math, science, English, social studies, and everything else. I would say that if I had to name a few, my wrestling coach challenged me to lead by example by appointing me captain of the team. My math and chemistry teachers purposely challenged my intellect to push me beyond the limits of most students. My chemistry teacher became my coach as I entered national competitions in the subject. My guidance counselor, biology, and English teachers emphasized the importance of time management for me.

Initially, I felt pressure from the other blacks and general population for being a “nerd.” This stigma subsided rather early in my high school career, as I came to know many people in one of my many activities. By growing up in Amityville and being exposed to the vagaries of the streets, I suppose many of my classmates who may have met me on those streets before knowing of the stigma had a hard time even considering me a “nerd.” In that, I had the best of both worlds—a holistic experience in Amityville and an academically intense experience in school.

I would say I accelerated my drive for school that I still have from a kindergarten experience. One of the other students knew how to count fast and recite the alphabet fast, and he knew a variety of animals. I felt he had a slight edge on me. We became friends and we pushed each other to learn more and more. In second grade, another friend and I were put in an advanced math section. That fueled the drive for academic excellence. From that point on, I think I started really thinking about school and realizing that self-confidence, that I could do anything, that all I had to do was put my mind to it, work hard, study, and do it. It paid off because out of 263 students, I ranked fourth in my class. I was only the second person to take five AP courses my senior year. A lot of people saw that as an anomaly, but I saw it as just me being me—me trying to learn and excel at different things.

How did you find out about MIT?

I found out about MIT two ways. In high school, I competed at the national level NAACP academic competition in chemistry. As I mentioned before, my chemistry teacher became my coach for these competitions. During my second competition as a junior, Dr. Benjamin Hooks—I think the president and chairman of the NAACP—at the opening ceremony was welcoming all of the contestants and everyone who had come. One of his comments sticks at the front of my mind to this day—“Yeah, participants have gone on to this orchestra and gone on to Hollywood. We even have one student who’s studying at MIT right now.” My curiosity about MIT heightened.

Later that year, I saw MIT referred to on “Head of the Class,” a program featuring gifted high school seniors. This further piqued my inter-

est in MIT. After I took the PSAT’s, MIT sent me some information about its offerings. My high school math department head told me more about the school and he encouraged me to apply

When was your first visit to MIT?

It was April or May of my senior year in high school. It was a self-initiated visit. I couldn’t make it to the Minority Spring Weekend sponsored by MIT, nor could I make it to some other event that they had. I had earned an Air Force ROTC scholarship, and the Air Force officers offered to give me an orientation to the ROTC program.

So I took a day off from school and came up to MIT. Captain Bailey, one of the Air Force ROTC administrators, showed me around MIT and introduced me to someone who gave tours of MIT. The tour guide brought me to the Athena clusters and various labs. My impression matched what I had heard—it seemed to be an intense place. I also wanted to see what my living experience would be like at MIT, so I decided to break off from the tour group and walk around on my own. In doing so, I ran into two black students. Both lived in Chocolate City. I spoke to them for five or ten minutes. They were impressed with their experience at MIT. Though they noted it was very rigorous academically, they enjoyed the very strong social life and the supportive black community. I felt almost a part of this community already by the warm reception. That impression made my choice of schools easier.

You applied to several schools. Were you interested in some other schools as well, other than MIT?

Yes. MIT was actually my fourth choice of schools after Brown University, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and Cornell University. West Point also received a lot of attention. But since I knew I wanted to try sports, and the Division I level might take away from my academics, I started to favor MIT over Brown and Cornell. I had not convinced myself fully if the military was something I wanted to pursue, so West Point dropped off the final list. RPI, the remaining contender, was very impressive. In the end, the city atmosphere, the sports opportunities, and the lasting impression of the Chocolate City brothers drew me to MIT.

Were you admitted to all those other schools?

Yes.

Did you come through Project Interphase or the MITES program at MIT?

No, I came straight as a freshman. The medium I did have of getting almost adjusted to MIT was through one of my friends whom I met at a high school scholarship banquet, Denzil Vaughn, who later became my classmate here at MIT. Denzil and I started talking about the schools we applied to, and MIT was one of them. He went to the Minority Spring Weekend and told me about it. He commented, "Wow, it's a community there and I think I'm going to go there." He went to the Interphase program, and every week that summer while he was there, I called him up and asked him how he was doing. One time I called him at eleven, afraid that I might be calling too late. He responded to my concern, "We don't go to bed till two o'clock." Though I thought it was strictly a case of poor time management, I soon realized that time management along with a healthy workload translated into late nights.

Reflect on your overall experience at MIT and identify what you consider of special significance in your academic and social life here, as well as your collegiate relationships.

Overall, my experience at MIT was definitely positive. I saw myself grow from a boy to a young man who still aspired to be more of a man. MIT humbly reemphasized that there is no substitute for hard work, aggressiveness, and ambition. Again, my father set the model of hard work by earning his living around the clock. That thought alone made it easier when I had five problem sets due and I was staying up all night to get the work done.

There were several things my freshman year that really shaped me as a person, that gave me a perspective of MIT, and that showed me what kind of person I would have to groom myself into to succeed at MIT. Like I said, the work was definitely rigorous, but I knew I could handle it. I told all of my professors that I was aspiring to get straight A's, not fully understanding what that really meant in terms of hard work. After the second round of tests, I was sure I had done well on each of them. But that day when I collected all my tests, I was completely shocked. I went out to 77 Mass Ave. in disbelief, part anger, and part confusion as I internalized three near failing tests.

At that point, I had to approach this place differently. I was approaching it in the wrong way.

I had to give the place the attention it deserved. I couldn't party throughout the weekend or hang out with my friends as much as I was doing, since I was already carrying a greater load than most other students. I was in the ROTC, playing football, and active with several campus organizations. So that was one experience that taught me, as far as academics, that I would have to really focus myself, go harder, have the confidence in myself, and use that confidence to get me through it. The lessons I learned that first semester at MIT carried me through graduation four years later.

About social life. On 15 March 1993, an incident on campus shaped my perspective and not only impacted my academic experience, but laid the foundation for my desire to influence the decision-making process at MIT. On the way back to the dorm, a couple of my friends heard somebody hanging out of a Phi Beta Epsilon (PBE) window screaming racial obscenities—specifically and repeatedly, "Kill all black people, kill Chocolate City!" The next day a few friends and I visited PBE to figure out what was going on. We were rebuffed at the door almost instantly, as if there were instructions not to let anyone in. Although I requested to see a friend who lived there, the person at the door refused me. At that point, I knew something was up. We went back to Chocolate City angry.

This is where I got to see what my niche at MIT would be. In Chocolate City, the upperclassmen were very good leaders, very strong leaders. We had a meeting to organize our response to this racist incident. We put on this big protest, and there were times when I asked myself, "Okay, why am I doing this?" And I said, "The reason why I'm doing this is because my pride and dignity are an uncompromisable value. I refuse to be disrespected like this on my own campus."

I felt the protest was the right thing to do, and the response from MIT bothered me. I had a strong start that semester, but amidst the protesting, my attention shifted away from the classroom. I remember my TA pulled me aside after a quiz because of my poor performance on the most recent quiz. He wanted to know why, after doing so well on the first few, I had done so horribly on that last one. When I explained that I had been tied up protesting the PBE incident, he asked, "What PBE incident?"

Though President Vest made a recognizable effort to resolve the matter by visiting Chocolate City and trying to understand the facts, it is fair to say that the rest of the administration failed to respond. Consequently, we wasted countless hours trying to get the office of the dean for undergraduate affairs to attempt to resolve this conflict. The minor action taken by the dean's office did not warrant the amount of time and energy we spent on the issue.

The lesson for me in the whole experience was clear. If I were to stay at MIT, I would have to prioritize my academics over social issues. Though it sounds easy, it was not. In fact, I never could just concentrate on academics without ever feeling it necessary to have an active leadership role on campus to put me in better position to influence the decisions made by the Institute that affected student life.

On collegiate relationships. The PBE incident and my natural inclination to get involved with campus leadership motivated me to run for sophomore class president. In winning this election and the subsequent elections through graduation, I was fortunate to work with some great individuals to really make a difference. Our events became the measuring stick of success for other classes. In doing this, I was fortunate to form some lasting friendships. Again, the quality and ambition of MIT students make me confident that we will eventually be in a position to help each other really make a difference in this world, whether it be in science and technology, business, or even politics.

In talking of collegiate relationships, I should mention the impact of Chocolate City and the rest of the black community. Witness the countless followings in department stores and the documented discrimination in job hirings and housing and so on, it is no secret that American society has been and continues to be racially biased. Living in Chocolate City, I had the unique, truly once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to bond and be shaped by many peer role models who looked like me. The amount of nurturing and mentoring that took place on a daily basis there strengthened the psyches and confidence of individuals who on an almost daily basis had their pride and dignity as African-American males questioned.

I grew tremendously from my relationships with the brothers of Chocolate City and the rest

of the black community. I will never forget the support the community gave me in running for and then serving as class president. I owe my success to them. Because of the class presidency, I was well positioned to be an influential student leader. This had been a goal of mine, to be better equipped to deal with any major issue on campus.

What was best about your experience at MIT and what was worst?

I guess what was best was that everyone around me had high aspirations and goals—not like me, but similar to me—and so when it came time for me to go after my goals, it was easy to get pushed to do so. One of my early goals was to run and be class president, so that I could really learn more about MIT, meet a lot of people, and be an influential student leader. I spoke to a lot of people, and this was when I really loved the black community. A lot of the older people in the black community—like Kristala Jones, Garvin and Griffin Davis, and Dale LeFebvre—told me, “Look, just because you don’t see too many blacks doing that, if you want to do it, go ahead and do it. I think you should do it, I think you’re a good person for it.”

I got together about eight of my buddies and put together a little campaign committee. We plastered the campus with leaflets and had a whole campaign plan, and it worked out. I won the election. That gave me a lot of confidence. I was president of the class. Some thought I had been the first black class president. Every bit of my past leadership experience helped me as class president. I had the fortune of working with some enthusiastic persons. Many folks attended our events and this probably was the reason many of us were reelected several times over. This was one of my best experiences. It led to so many other great opportunities, but more importantly, I learned about my own leadership strengths and weaknesses.

So you actually were president of your class from sophomore year up to graduation.

Yes. Like I said, that was one of my best experiences. I most valued meeting others who also had high goals and high aspirations, and as class president, I was able to get to know many of them. It was great to see at graduation the number of people I really had developed good relationships with. In addition to meeting the students, I also

met faculty and administrators. One of the things we said we were going to do was have student/faculty/administrator study breaks. To our knowledge, classes had never done those before. They were very successful. For a lot of us, those study breaks tore down a lot of stereotypes about the faculty and administrators at MIT. Many of the attending faculty members became mentors for my classmates and me. Serving as class president was my best experience at MIT.

My worst experience was burning out at the end of my first semester, sophomore year. Earlier in the semester, I had been doing very well. That was the semester I had gained a lot of my academic confidence. Instead of employing my study methods with other people in big study groups, I decided to just study by myself and learn what I could on my own. And for the first time at MIT, I “perfected” a test, a test where the average was 40. By December, I was still heavily involved in class government events and I was still doing a lot of things in ROTC and my other student organizations. When it came down to finals, I was just completely burned out. I was taking five courses at the time, so I had five finals back to back. I did terribly in those finals, and instead of coming out with A’s in that first semester, I came out with B’s and C’s. That devastated me. That was an experience I would say was kind of the worst as far as how I felt, but it definitely helped me do better in the future.

I learned a lot about myself from that experience. One of the things I learned is that I’m a person who loves to do things for other people and I love to see other people happy. A lot of times in that whole process I neglected myself. I realized I should use the month prior to finals to catch up in any class I had fallen behind in. I was so focused on doing a good job and in being a responsible member of each of my organizations that I was not responsible to myself. This lesson will definitely be handy the rest of my life.

When you look at coming into a place like this, and you reflect back now, what kind of adjustments did you find necessary to fit into the MIT environment? You really did some things that very few black students have done. I think especially for black students, and probably for most students, the most important thing is to realize that you need other people for academic and personal support and guidance. One of the

biggest adjustments you’re going to have to deal with is to realize that in part of your planning and getting through MIT, you’re going to have to plan your relationships with other people. You just can’t do it by yourself. I think in high school, like I said before, the confidence that I had in second grade poured over through high school and brought me to MIT. But I realized that same confidence had to be complemented with mentors like yourself, Dean Tyler, Dean Osgood, Dean Colbert, Professor Bacow, Ms. Tobie Weiner, and several other professors and administrators. The reliance on mentors is essential to maximizing one’s time at MIT.

A lot of times, we as black students were never in an environment where other black students could help us out, because we were mostly the only blacks in the honors group or the only blacks in an all-black school who were doing very well. No one really could provide that help for us. But I think coming to MIT, I know I had to realize that, for one, I could receive a lot of help from other blacks as well as the other students. Again, there is no substitution for working hard, being aggressive, and being ambitious. It was definitely an adjustment to learn what it really meant to work hard, be aggressive, and understand true ambition.

Talk a little bit about living in Chocolate City. Over the years, there has been a lot of controversy about Chocolate City, that it’s bad and so forth. As a leader, particularly as a student leader of all the students in this institution in your time here, what do you say about Chocolate City and what do you say to people who say it’s a negative kind of thing?

My first semester I decided not to pursue living in Chocolate City for the reasons you mentioned—it was bad, it was separatist, and all the same common remarks I am used to hearing any time a group of blacks get together. However, by my second semester I was impelled to live there. Again, though my confidence is based on God’s love for me, I must say I was impressed with the academic and personal confidence of the Chocolate City brothers. Many of these brothers were very active on campus partially because of the supportive environment of Chocolate City. Thus, the notion of the house being separated from MIT’s campus holds as much weight as saying that any special interest group that lives together—whether it be

women, athletes, religious groups—is separated from MIT.

In fact, I would say the opposite. Chocolate City brothers seemed to be predisposed to being active members of the MIT community. I remember brothers on Institute committees and as active UROPers, teaching assistants, athletes, and in various other campus activities. In fact, I thought they were unique in that they were not like most students. In Chocolate City, it seemed like people were heavily involved in the MIT community, and that impelled me to live there.

So if anybody says that, I would just challenge those persons to name any other living group that has a larger percentage of students as active as Chocolate City in the MIT population. One of the things I noticed last year was that out of the many different Institute committees, a third or maybe a quarter of those students were African-Americans. That tells me that when people say things about Chocolate City and the African-American community, they have other motives. There are other motives, maybe some fears or some prejudices that are hidden, and they're just trying to use Chocolate City as a rallying tool to capture the whole community. I take high offense at that, because Chocolate City is definitely something that helped shape me as a person, as far as my character, as far as my self-confidence, and as far as my leadership abilities.

And again, the contribution to MIT by Chocolate City over the years in a number of ways is tremendous. A co-worker, a white female, once told me how much she and others respected Chocolate City. It was mainly because we knew how to make the Institute respond to wrongs on any matter, and she could tell from that that there were a lot of strong leaders in the house with a lot of character. I could not agree with her more.

How does living with a group of young black men like yourself help you to build character? How can you explain that to someone who doesn't understand?

You say "young men." Like I said, I came from my neighborhood in Amityville and I was the only one I knew of going to college in that neighborhood, the only young black male going to college. So when I got to MIT, one of the things I looked for was a kind of environment that was going to nurture me. I lived in several dorms before I moved to Chocolate City. When I got to

Chocolate City, I had never been in an environment where there were other black males pushing me to do what I had to do, or black males who were doing very well at this place in all facets.

One thing I respected the most outside of academics was the brothers' intellectual ability. I respected that, because as a black man in this society I realized that I just couldn't go through without critically thinking about things and still preserve my own dignity. When I was able to see that in the brothers in Chocolate City, I realized that was something I needed as a person. The brothers in Chocolate City obviously valued academics. Collectively, there was a strong sense of self as black men. Most importantly, these brothers seemed to know how to prioritize academics without sacrificing this sense of who they were. This ability to balance academic excellence with self-pride, in a sometimes racially hostile community, is what built character. And that character building is the essence of Chocolate City.

Many of these people who were not like you had gotten a lot of this even before they got here, and continued to get it. There were people who have had that kind of experience, but to be among men like yourself who think like you and who have advanced and could give you ideas about how you could critically look at things as a black male, those were some of the additional kinds of things you would get there that you wouldn't get anywhere else.

Definitely. I think another thing is that there's a lot of pressure for not "selling out" the black community. A lot of times people don't want you to get involved in a lot of the mainstream activities because they're afraid you will never come back to help the people in your community. And that has a term, "sell-out." Coming to MIT—whether we like it or not, no matter where we came from, whether it's the inner city in the Bronx or the woods of Kentucky—one can be thought to be a "sell-out." In Chocolate City, it was sobering to be around others who understood this phenomenon and equally understood the true meaning of being a "sell-out," which I would define as acting in ways that shows one's dislike for oneself.

How would you assess the quality and availability of services and assistance that we as an institution provided you in terms of support programs?

I think overall it was good, but there's a lot of room for improvement.

Talk about some ways that we as an institution could improve and enhance the experience of black students at MIT.

Advising, both academic and personal. This would enhance the experience of all students. A lot of times academic advisors can give you a lot of academic help but not much more. We don't have a system to guarantee that advisors also know students as persons. Students should have somebody who knows them as a person from the time they arrive to the time they graduate. I think the support services do a good job of counseling when you have problems. But a lot of times, by the time you gather up enough steam to get to those things, the damage is already done. You've already felt and performed badly for that period of the event.

I think students need someone who can be both a support person and a friend. Looking back, when I was evaluating colleges, Brown University was always commended for their guidance system. I don't know what it's like, but all the other Ivy League schools were trying to model a program similar to Brown's for the support of their students. That was something I kept looking for at MIT, but I never found it, exactly. Like I said, the academic advisors were good, but some of them may not be fit to be total advisors.

One important thing to realize is that students are usually between sixteen and twenty-two years old. It's a tremendous growing time for anybody, moving from high school and our parents on to college and independence. Those four or five years of our lives are very important, and it's important to have people there who can help shape us. I think a lot of times the support is not there in that facet. But, like I said, there are a lot of good things.

I think we need to continue to hear and talk about the things that are weak in our institution. It's easy to talk about the good things, but we need to hear about the things that are not so good.

If you had to summarize and analyze your perspective on the MIT experience, what would you say? This is particularly relative to that perspective that may have evolved over time. You may have had one impression your first year or your second year, but now that you have gotten out—you just got out—you're looking at those four years you've had here. If I asked that question five years from now, you might have a different per-

spective, but clearly you have a different perspective now than you did your sophomore year. So when you look back, after graduating from MIT in June of this year, how would you summarize and analyze your experience here at MIT?

My MIT experience has prepared me to challenge myself to do anything I would like to in this world. It has done it in a way that was hard at times, but if it were easy, everyone would do it. I felt MIT made me stumble in the places I needed to stumble, just to let me know that those were areas in which I was weak. MIT did a good job of teaching me what my strengths were and exposing me to my own inner self, my weaknesses, my deepest weaknesses that nobody sees. And it didn't show them to me once in a subtle way, it showed them to me several times in blatant ways.

How did it do that, do you think?

MIT challenges people to grow academically, socially, and professionally through many experiences, whether it be in the classroom, the research lab, the locker room, or the student organization board meeting. In each of those settings, it takes different skill sets to succeed. By experiencing much of what MIT has to offer, people can really evaluate themselves in different situations. This evaluation is sure to bring out one's strengths and weaknesses.

I think MIT presents you that complete experience as a person. It offers you so many different opportunities to try so many different things. You do very well at things and you fail at things. You learn what your professional weaknesses or strengths are. In class, you know what your academic strengths and weaknesses are. And walking around MIT and Boston, you know what your social weaknesses and social strengths are.

Depending on the person's willingness to get involved in various activities, MIT can do a great job at sharpening each aspect of one's self to be prepared for the "real world." I think a lot of other schools are different. One of my friends went to another school and she believes, now that she's out of that school, that it's time to really face life since she was babied so much. The students were pampered so much that it was almost ridiculous. I think MIT did a good job in not pampering us, and that's good. It's like a spoiled child and a child that's not spoiled. MIT doesn't spoil anybody. I think being spoiled gets you in trouble in society,

because no one in society is just going to hand you something for no reason. But when you're not spoiled, you're able to be more deliberate and more thoughtful, more appreciative of the hard work that it takes to earn things in life. MIT hammered home that lesson several times.

You talked a little bit about what MIT has done to help you understand yourself even better. You were the president of your class for three consecutive years when most of your class consisted of white students. You've had a chance to look at the white students, you've worked with a lot of white students, and you also have been very much part of a number of the organizations that are by and large black—Chocolate City, the Society for Black Engineers, and on and on. There haven't been many black students who have taken the risk, I would say, to work in a much more all-white setting of students. Why is that?

I believe it is a comfort issue. My experience at MIT is very similar to my high school experience in New York. I learned to be comfortable as the only black on the soccer team, the only black Boy Scout, the only black in my honors courses. And I always lived in a black neighborhood. So just by growing up that way, I had to learn how to interact with a lot of people. By being a spoiled child, the baby of ten, I also got a lot of things I wanted. I got accustomed to getting things I wanted. That kind of sounds weird, but being at MIT, a lot of things I wanted came in a professional way, in a social way, in academic ways, and luckily in a lot of growth ways as well.

I wanted to grow as a person, so I wasn't going to let my race or anyone's race prevent me from growing as a person. Just because I was black, that wasn't going to mean that I was not going to interact with other students and be a better person. I was not going to do that. There is too much to learn from each person, regardless of race, to make that a factor in who I decided to interact with. Not interacting with the general MIT population would have devalued my total MIT experience. I challenged myself to interact with as many people as I could in order to learn and grow, regardless of their race or socioeconomic background.

Are you saying that when you look at the way you grew up, you sort of duplicated that experience at MIT?

Looking back, I guess I did. But I am glad that it was a natural phenomenon and not a forced one.

What's the lesson for young blacks coming to a place like this?

The lesson is to know who you are—like the old proverb, “Know thyself.” That's something that takes forever. But young blacks should try to understand their true interests, aptitudes, and values as a person. In doing this, they are less likely to make poor decisions on how to spend their time. Many of my most successful classmates came to MIT and knew exactly what they wanted, what their interests were. Because they had keen interest in certain things, they developed the aptitude to do those things. And they never spent time on issues they did not value as a person.

Also, young blacks should recognize the immense opportunities at MIT. To best take advantage of them, they should value their classmates, their professors, and administrators. A good relationship with each of these groups is a key advantage MIT has over other institutions, and that makes the four years really worth it.

Have you seen situations here where there have been black students who lived in an all-white community, come to Chocolate City, and then not be as outgoing as you were in dealing with white students?

Definitely. Like I said before, the stigmas that play out in the community as being a “sell-out” are also playing in the MIT community, if you don't put yourself out there in the black community. The black community here is so embracing that it's amazing. When you go to other places, you don't see that. But what happens if a person refuses to be embraced is that it almost puts a wall between them and the black community.

Let's take, for instance, a black male who may be going with a white female. Will that, from your experience here, put that black male totally in conflict with the black community?

No. Several Chocolate City brothers have had interracial relationships. It did not put them in conflict with the black community at all. The same applied to others who did not live in Chocolate City.

You've seen examples of one who has committed himself or herself to the community—the black community—and then has dated outside of the race, and you didn't see any problems?

They were still embraced by the black community.

Based on your own experience, is there any advice you might offer to other black students who are entering or planning to enter MIT?

“Never forget why you came.” At the last Martin Luther King banquet, I asked Dr. Shirley Jackson what piece of advice she would give me, as an aspiring young black male, about some of the goals I had in life that she had. And she said, “Keep your eyes on the prize.”

That’s something I would say right here. That advice would have to be, “Keep your eyes on the prize.” The prize here is not to just get an MIT degree, it’s a wee bit more. You don’t want to just come in and get your degree and have nobody know you. Whatever you do, you want to leave your mark. Whether it’s being the best student in your department, the top UROP student in your department, a dedicated community servant to the point where everybody in Cambridge loves you, or the key leader of an organization, you have to make a conscious effort to leave your mark. This way you ensure you have made your MIT experience the most growthful one it could be.

The “eyes on the prize” of MIT is to do the best you can academically, being careful not to get sidetracked by other seemingly important issues. Sometimes it is easy to get caught up in all of the many racially charged issues. At those times, I repeat what I had to tell myself on many occasions—“Look, your time will come to do the community work that you have to do. But right now, you need to serve yourself by getting a degree.”

Is there any other issue that comes to mind as you reflect on your own experience and on the experience of other black students at MIT?

Yes. I had said before that there were two experiences I would consider the worst here. One was academic, which I discussed already. The second was the PBE incident. That incident was a big reality check. I remember that summer I was still kind of upset because nothing had been done by the MIT administration about the fraternity that had been accused, or for the people who had been hurt.

So I went to meet with one of the deans who was in charge at the time. I wrote down everything, our entire conversation. Dean Eisenmann came to facilitate the conversation, because I was really annoyed by the fact that nothing had been

done. When I went to his office, he told me something had in fact been done. But I asked him how come we, as Chocolate City, had not been informed, since we were the other party in addition to the fraternity? He said he had tried to contact us. But there were six of us on campus and in the local area, including the president, so if any attempt had been made, somebody would have been contacted. There wasn’t any attempt made.

That kind of left a bad taste in my mouth. Also, I asked this person, “Look, MIT is not doing anything right now about this incident. Obviously, in the next three years while I’m here it’s not going to happen the same way, because I know how to get your attention again. But when I leave, how do we prevent it from happening then?” He goes, “That’s not up to me, that’s up to you as a community.” Basically, the message that he sent to me then was, “As an MIT administrator, I’m not going to be responsible for everything in your community or everything that happens to you. If you want certain outcomes, then as a community you have to be organized, you have to be cohesive, you have to sacrifice all the other things that other students don’t have to handle to get the things that you’re talking about.” That hurt me, because what I heard was, “Okay, Matt, it is necessary to prioritize one very important value over the other. You need to value academics more than your dignity.” I felt I couldn’t sacrifice one for the other, and that’s what he was telling me to do. Again, that gets into the fine balance of the two that is necessary as a black student.

Another great experience was meeting our commencement speaker, Vice President Al Gore. President Vest selected several students to meet Vice President Gore. Of six students selected, three of us were black. We were selected for our campus leadership and the respect people had for us within the community at all levels—students, faculty, and administrators. Meeting the vice president of the United States was definitely amazing. He seemed to be a very sincere person as he talked to us about the importance of leadership. It was great just to see the other black student leaders meet the vice president as a reward for doing the things they had done for the entire MIT community.

I think black students should realize that this place is full of resources and opportunities. If you put your time in, good things will happen, as I saw

with those other two students who got to meet the vice president of the United States.

Basically what you're saying is that if you work hard at a place like this, and fight over the obstacles you may encounter, there are some rewards you get. That's a major achievement, to be able to meet the vice president of the United States, and you got that chance because you were one of the leaders in this institution as a student. You had to work hard for it, and there were a couple of other black students in that category. I think what you're saying is very important, that taking advantage of opportunities here is very important, because there are some real benefits that you get. You worked hard and you've been a first-class student citizen and leader.

Thank you for helping mold me as a leader.