

“Untold Stories: Histories of People of Color in Oregon”
U-Engage ALS 199 Fall 2014
OSU Faculty/Staff Oral History Project

Date: November 3, 2014

Location: Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR

Length: 00:37:22

Interviewee: Marilyn Stewart

Interviewers: Jordan Rodgers, Jenny Vorvik, and Viktor Rodriguez

Transcriber: Avery Sorensen

[00:00:00]

Student: Okay. Our names are Jordan Rodgers, Viktor Rodriguez, and Jenny Vorvik. We are students in Oregon State University’s U-Engage Class: Untold Stories of People of Color in Oregon. Today’s date is November 3rd, 2014, and we are conducting an oral history interview with Marilyn Stewart. Okay, please state your name and spell it out loud.

MS: Okay. My name is Marilyn, M-A-R-I-L-Y-N. Stewart, S-T-E-W-A-R-T.

Student: Great, thank you. Your birthplace?

MS: Uh, my birthplace is in the South, Dawsonville, Georgia.

Student: Which ethnic or cultural background would you identify yourself with?

MS: Identify – I identify myself as a Black American.

Student: When and where were your parents born, and what are their backgrounds?

MS: My parents were born in the late 1930s, and they were born in northern Florida.

Student: Where did you grow up? And then, where were you raised?

MS: I was born in Georgia simply because in northern Florida it was faster to get to the Georgia town than it was to get to the hospital in Florida. So even though I say I was born in Georgia, I was basically raised in northern Florida in a small town called Marianna -- Marianna, Florida.

Student: And did you live there throughout, like, your adolescence or?

MS: Absolutely.

Student: Okay, cool. What was your transition from high school to college?

MS: That was an interesting time. My transition was really about – because I was a younger student in the sense of I--when I graduated, I was 17. So, when I started college, I was 17. And so, there were a number of my peers who were already 18 and some 19 in their first year of college. So, it was a, it was a real interesting transition because, partly because, I had a difficult time in high school and then my guidance counsellor didn't think that I was – quote, unquote – college material. You know, looking back I could kind of see I didn't fit perfectly into a definition of a college student, but I was a good student; I just wasn't a great student.

Student: Interesting. Thank you. Where did you attend school and what did you study?

MS: At college?

Student: Yes.

MS: Okay. My first college was Chipola Junior College. And, at the time, there was a difference between junior colleges and community colleges. Junior colleges were really, kind of, pathways into four year institutions. And so, when I went to Chipola, I wanted to be an accountant. Now, because I was first generation, low-income, person of color, I didn't necessarily have what I needed to be able to determine how that was gonna be about; I just knew that I wanted to be an accountant. And that was more about what I had been told that I did well while I was in school and just some encouragement from some of the clubs that I had joined. For instance, I was in FBLA – Future Business Leaders of America – when I was in high school and I enjoyed being in that club. So, I thought for sure I was gonna be an accountant. And even further, I was gonna be a CPA.

Student: So then at what point did you realize that that wasn't what...?

MS: My very first college algebra class [laughter], yeah. You know, I was not prepared for college algebra. And, at that time, there weren't a lot of assistance and support for students who weren't ready immediately to go into certain classes.

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And so, I sat there and I just was not prepared for what the professor was teaching, and I didn't know how to ask the questions that I needed to ask without coming off as what my guidance counsellor said – I should not be in college. And so, I didn't, and so my first term was not a great term.

Student: Interesting. Okay, who were and are your mentors, personally and professionally?

MS: Hm. My mentors, aside from the obvious of my parents, I would go as far as to go back there. I was also in the military and one of my first real bosses, his name was Ken Strain, and he saw a different type of potential that I had. And so, he would talk to me about taking classes, and, at the time, there was a lot of correspondence classes and things like that that was available to military personal. And I took some of those, and I also—he signed me up, basically, for any extra training for computers, which was just really, kind of, coming out to mainstream offices and things—so this was in 1985, so '85, '86.

Student: Okay. And at what point of your, like, lifetime was that? Like, was this after college?

MS: This was after college; I hadn't—I didn't graduate, I joined the military. And so, while I was in the military, one of my first, very first, true mentors was Ken Strain. And after that, then when I came here, which was in 1989, I—my first mentor was Tom Marsh. And Tom was the dean of the graduate school at that time. And I do have others, Lawrence Griggs, Janet Nishihara, yeah. Needless to say, my husband, in-laws, yeah.

Student: Yeah, for sure. Okay, cool. Thank you.

VR: So why did you decide to come to Corvallis, and specifically Oregon State?

MS: Again, that I would attribute to my husband who is actually from the area. I was from Florida, he's from Oregon, and so we moved back here so he could continue his education, and I worked. So, that's how I met Doctor Marsh when I first got here.

Student: Where did you meet your husband?

MS: In Washington D.C.

Student: Okay. Was that through military?

MS: Mmhmm, we were both in the military.

VR: And then, what were your first impressions of the university and then Corvallis as a community?

MS: My initial impression was that it was just beautiful. I moved here in August, in late August. And to come to Corvallis in August or September is the time to be here because it was just beautiful, the tree-lined streets and it really, it, very green. And my town where I'm from in northern Florida is very green and lots of trees, and it just made me feel at home.

VR: So, since you moved here, have you been here since? Or did you ever move around?

MS: I did move a little bit. I moved here in '89, and then in '91, we moved to Sacramento, California. And we were there for a couple of years and then we moved back to Corvallis and OSU in 1994, and I've been here ever since.

VR: And what jobs have you held here at OSU, like job duties?

MS: Okay. Well, let's go – my current position is acting co-director for EOP, the Educational Opportunities Program. But I've also held positions – executive assistant, office coordinator, operations manager, advisor, also academic counsellor.

[00:10:03]

Student: Do you think that your past with your high school academic counsellor and going through that whole situation of you saying that he, or, your counsellor told you that you weren't college material, do you think that influences your position for your career today?

MS: Absolutely, very much so. When she said that to me, it really took something away from what I thought; I was very conscious about being an empowered young woman and I felt like, "Oh yeah I can do anything." And, it was so deflating for this counsellor to say that to me. And I didn't realize it, like, right away because when you're 17 or 16, you're kind of, just, not, more reacting versus thinking and then coming up with something to follow up after that. I just kind of internalized it, and I didn't really realize to what degree until later in life. And as I move through – even when I was in the military and then afterwards, that was sort of a path that I was on of assisting others-- and definitely in higher ed., but that came a little bit later.

VR: Who has been important to you here at OSU in terms of your work and position?

MS: Uh, who has been important to me. Well, I guess I'll start by saying, definitely my colleagues. And one in particular who has been with me since--we started together in the program 20 years ago, her name is Urmila. And so, Urmila and I – who is also one of my, is another co-director for EOP right now while our director is taking an interim

position. Urmila and I have not only grown, but--we have grown together, but we have, we've kept a very close working relationship as well. And so, aside from her, I would also add other, some former colleagues who have gone to other positions as well as my supervisors. And my students as well I would put in that category.

Student: How have you seen the Oregon State community change over time in terms of diversity and inclusion?

MS: It's changed in some ways, in some ways not as much, but it really has changed. I think it's grown in some areas and maybe declined in others.

Student: Can you elaborate on that?

MS: Well, when I say declined, because that's probably one of the ones that you pick up on first, I would -- when I think in numbers, I think in numbers of African American students to OSU has declined over the years. I would say, in regards to the numbers that the university has now, which we're on the verge of 30,000 students, and at the time when I was here, I think we were around 11 or 12. And so, to have around the same number in African American students, I would say, it's definitely not grown.

Student: Are there any events, initiatives, programs in particular that stand out besides, just, the amount of people that you were talking about before, the changes over time. Are there any kind of programs or events you think that have changed throughout the years?

MS: Yes. As a matter of fact--and I want to say it was '96 or '97 when the university really had a large push, and the MEO, which was the Minority Education Offices, were first created, which is now ISS--the Intercultural Student Services, I believe it is--which is also still in a transition.

[00:15:02]

Student: What do you see as the OSU's role supporting faculty and staff of color and students of color?

MS: Well, that one -- I'm looking down because I believe I decided to think about that a little bit more because I wanted to be more intentional about my thoughts around that because that's kind of a broad question. And, I was thinking that the role of OSU is to recruit, prepare, and retain students and faculty of color. It is the "how" to go about doing that is where it gets a little sticky -- but um, and maybe more debate on how to go about that. But I do see that role.

Student: Okay. So then what do you see as your role in supporting your faculty and staff, colleagues, and students of color?

MS: I would say to prepare and retain students. And then to support my colleagues who are faculty of color.

Student: What recommendations do you have for OSU to become a more inclusive campus? Please reflect the season of change the university is currently in and where you see the university heading.

MS: Could we pause?

Student: Yes.

Student: Okay, sorry, it's kind of a long one. So, what recommendations do you have for Oregon State to become a more inclusive campus? Let's just start with that.

MS: Okay. That question was another one I thought, you know, I really need to give this some thought. And not that my response would be something that could easily happen, but I did think about, maybe, the creation of a task force that would be dedicated to recruit, grow, and monitor students of color or groups of color that would be more or less than 5% of whatever the population is or the enrollment. To include faculty and staff, to--and use of current faculty and staff to include their skills and knowledge to be able to do something like this. So, basically reaching out to other faculty and staff of color and recognizing that what they are already presenting for campus. And then, recruitment of other faculty of color as well as students. And then of course, which is always a big one, is retaining--retention is huge. So.

Student: What are some issues of importance that respect, with respect to people of color that the community is facing, beyond the local community in the state?

MS: I think I would go so far as to -- because this, again, is a very broad kind of topic-- and um, I would think number one is financial. So, that is always a topic of conversation, definitely in the black community as well as other communities of color. But financial, when we're talking about savings and retirement, I know it's a part of the discussion not all of the community can focus on those things, which is huge as far as what your future is gonna look like--as well as quality health care, race relations, and not necessarily in that order. But, I think those are, those are the big topics within the community.

VR: How did you get started working in Educational Opportunities Program?

MS: Well, I applied for an office coordinator position. I was interviewed with approximately 18 people in that meeting, in that interview, and, to my surprise, I actually got the job, but I was scared out of my wits [laughter].

[00:20:07]

Student: Was this after--you said you came back in '94, correct? Was that how soon after you moved back did you decide to search for a job here at the school?

MS: Yes, yes. Actually when I initially came back to the area, I worked for the Benton County Health Department for a couple months, for a few months. And--but during that time, I was applying on campus because that was where my, that was my main goal, was to get back on campus and to be able to really get close, get more into the academic side of campus. But, I needed to get my foot in the door.

VR: Have there been any special influences to get you where you are now?

MS: Uh yes, I would say so. Um, special influences. I would say just, you know, the people who support me, the timing of different events that statewide, state-wise as well as in the city. So um, yeah. I would say so.

VR: Are there ways you would like to expand the program or changes you would like to see in the future?

MS: Hm, expand the program. Yeah, I believe so. I think, possibly, have a more centralized component of diversity access to first-year, sophomore, junior, you know, those types of initiatives and having the core of that be academic counselling.

VR: Have there been any one thing that you think the program has been most successful at?

MS: I think the program has been successful in a number of ways. But, if I can only choose one thing, I would have to say, it's been mostly successful in providing the highest quality of academic support for students.

Student: How do students get involved, like in your own words, like how would you describe what your program does? Like, we can look it up online--but, I mean, and we have--but, how would you explain the importance and the meaning and the reasoning of the program for students?

MS: Okay, those are a lot of different questions that rolled in there.

Student: What do you think the main purpose of the program is for students?

MS: Okay. The main purpose really is to provide academic support. We're an academic unit, and we provide support to students who apply to the program. We provide, kind of, support to students in general, the university students. But for students in the program, we have dedicated a few sections of courses as well as, again, the core of our program is academic counselling. And, that is more of a high touch with our students in the program where we meet with them more often than when a student is in a certain major and normally you meet with your major advisor maybe once a term. And, I—right now, there are some initiatives that are in place to, kind of, change that a little bit. And, depending what college, what department, that sort of thing, is it would depend on how often a student actually still meets with their academic advisor.

VR: What would you say is the most difficult part of your job?

MS: I would say the most difficult really is not being able to assist more students because there are a lot of students out there who could benefit from the program, but the program has a capacity. And so, that's the most, I would say, challenging for the program is just not being able to reach as many students as we would like to.

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VR: And are there any other topics you'd like to discuss that we haven't already brought up?

MS: I wouldn't say topics, but I would talk about what our overall goal is. And, our overall goal at the program is really to help students to reach their goal. So we don't tell a student what their goal is, but we do support them in what they identify as their goal. And sometimes that goal may change, and that's one of the beauties of being in the program, is if a goal or a major changes, then you may need to change colleges or you may need to change advisors--the beauty about being in the program is that once you're in the program, then you're in until you graduate. And so, that remains a constant for the students. So, at least there's that piece even if the student is not absolutely sure what their end-goal is.

Student: So, what were, or are, some of your challenges and how do you strive to overcome them?

MS: My challenges, hm. Time. Time is my biggest challenge. There never seems to be enough of it. Saying that, you know, when I--when I started advising--or yeah, I started as an advisor and then later became academic counsellor--time management was always huge for me. And so, when I went back to school to get my Master's degree in, in higher ed., higher ed. leadership, I really wanted to focus it on time management.

And, time management for me is just core. Everything that you do, it may be more in some areas and less in others, but that became, like, my focus for everything I do. So, even as a director and as an academic counsellor, my students will tell you that's the first place I go, is I want to find out what your time management looks like because I just think it's key to everything that we do. And if we – if people, and I know there are a lot of people like me who are multitaskers, and if you are a multitasker, then you must be, kind of, in charge of what your time is gonna look like. So yeah [laughter].

Student: What do you see as some of your greatest accomplishments?

MS: After my family, of course – I have two boys, two young men now. But as far as a professional accomplishment, initially it was when I decided to join the military, and to get through basic training was definitely an accomplishment. But after, since then, I also went back and completed my degrees, as well, as an adult person. So, those for me are definitely achievements. Each time I help a student and I realize that the student got an “ah-ha” moment, for me, that's another success for me. So--and it's on-going as far as I'm concerned. It makes me really happy when a student has reached their goal, especially their academic goal. And sometimes we set many of those academic goals, and each time we get one, we celebrate it. And, for OSU, and because we work at EOP mainly with undergraduate school, undergraduate students, then it's important for that goal to be to graduate from OSU with a degree.

[00:30:24]

Student: You were saying that you went back to school to get your degrees after you finished the military. So how long were you in the military for and where did you end up getting your degree from?

MS: Well, I was in the military for eight years. And so, four of those were active duty, traveling around. Another two was being a reservist. And the last two was being a reservist but not active, being ready to be called up if I needed to--so that's what those, the last two are. Repeat the question again, sorry.

Student: Where did you receive your degree from after you finished in the military; 'cuz you said you were in Washington D.C. for a while, you met your husband there, right?

MS: I was.

Student: Okay, so then did you come back here for school or...?

MS: I did. It was once I was here. And I kept – I was taking classes here and there all along, but, again, when you have a family, you have to be a little more creative. And, at

the time, I had a young son and my husband and later when I came back, then, I had two younger sons and my husband and I. So, being very creative in the sense of how do we make this work where our sons don't have to actually pay for mom not completing the education at an earlier time? And when I'm talking to my students a lot of times, that will also come out because I really encourage my students, if at all possible, finish on this time and not take the break and then say, "Oh, I'll do it later." Because it's possible to do it later, I'm certainly a witness to that, but it's also harder when you have other people who are counting on you, and someone, you know, other than just yourself. So, it just becomes a little more — it's definitely doable — but it becomes a different kind of challenge. And so, that's what I did. So, I finished up my Bachelor's degree in business and then I came back to finish a Master's degree in education.

Student: Cool. Is there anything else that we haven't discussed that you would like to add or share information regarding anything that we have already discussed?

MS: Hm. Let me take a look at that just for a moment.

Student: Okay.

MS: I will talk just a little bit, just mention there was a piece on there where you were asking to reflect on a season of change at the university. And I had thought about that just a little bit because since my tenure here from the late '80s until now, it has changed quite a bit as far as the infrastructure of campus and what it looks like. And so, when I saw that question, it was broad in the sense of, wow, you know, how would I answer that? And so, then I started to think about, you know, the changing physically in the sense of the amount of buildings that are here where it used to be more parks and trees and that sort of thing. And I thought, that was very different for me, and I had to ask myself sort of that question of, is this a good thing or not? And, you know, there's always a silver lining to everything, and the positive that — my positive take away is we are in a historic area, and so when they are creating a building, these new buildings, they have to keep that in mind.

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And so, the new buildings and structures that they have added to campus has not necessarily taken away from the beauty of campus, they've, kind of, stayed within the parameters of the historic district. And, when I first moved here, one of the things that I loved so about OSU was how it reminded me a lot of the old Ivy League kind of schools on the East coast that I had been accustomed to seeing. And, it's just, you know, structurally it's just a beautiful campus.

Student: Cool. So I kind of have a question a little back, jumping towards the EOP programs. So it seems to me, after working with students for, continuously, for four years that you build, like, very good relationships with them. Do you have students come back after they've graduated and kind of, like, share their success stories with you and revisit?

MS: Yes.

Student: Is it always nice? I feel like it'd be really nice to always see them come back.

MS: Always. Oh, it's always nice. You never get tired of seeing, you know, those faces come back. For one, it's always nice to see a familiar face. So, and I think that's just human nature. But, it's always nice to see how students have grown from their education because education is important, and each time I hear a story – and it doesn't have to be elaborate to the point of, you know, that they're, you know, moving the world in some, in some certain way. But, whatever their goal was, and if that's to support their family, then that's wonderful too. If it's to go out and work in the community in a certain way, and their able to do that because of their education at OSU and if I had some small part to do with that, I mean, it's just, yeah. It's wonderful.

Student: Yeah, I could imagine.

MS: Yeah, it is.

Student: Well, okay. Thank you so much.

MS: You're welcome, thank you.

[end of interview 00:37:22]