

This interview is part of the **Southern Oral History Program** collection at the **University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill**. Other interviews from this collection are available online through [www.sohp.org](http://www.sohp.org) and in the **Southern Historical Collection** at **Wilson Library**.

## **N.7 Undergraduate Internship Program: Fall 2015**

Interview N-0040

Russell Peterson

8 October 2015

Abstract – p. 2

Field Notes – p. 3

Transcript – p. 4

**ABSTRACT—RUSSELL PETERSON, MD**

Interviewee: Russell Peterson

Interviewer: Destinie Pittman

Interview Date: November 8, 2015

Location: Merriott Residence Inn, Chapel Hill, NC

Length: 57:35

Describes his area of origin and other areas he has lived in and schooled in (Thomasville, Fairmont, and born in High Point, NC); there are 3 school systems in Fairmont, NC according to race: white, black, and American Indian; Peterson's family life and family education levels; occupations of parents and grandparents were related to education; Baptist Christianity played an important role in Peterson's upbringing, "If you can't go to church, you can't do anything."; Precollege education was in one school; Peterson's father was the principal and allowed him to foster interpersonal skills with teachers and peers; attended summer bridge program for Carolina which better prepared him for his academic career at Carolina; Decided to go to college because it was a family assumption; applied to 5 schools but integration policy provided some obstacles; encountered 2 incidents of racism at Carolina due to the grading system; difference between Northern white people and Southern white people; undergraduate and graduate degrees in Zoology; campus involvement; difference in support and encouragement between UNC and Howard University; Southern Baptist Convention; Career in Zoology; changed from being on the premedical track; advises to be your own advocate; integration and mentorship for black students.

FIELD NOTES – RUSSELL PETERSON, MD

*(Compiled November 11, 2015)*

Interviewee: Russell Peterson, MD

Interviewer: Destinie Pittman

Interview Date: November 8, 2015

Location: Merriott Residence Inn, Chapel Hill, NC

THE INTERVIEWEE: Russell Peterson is a UNC alumni who is originally from High Point, North Carolina. Peterson has also lived in other small towns in North Carolina, such as Fairmont and Thomasville.

THE INTERVIEWER. Destinie Pittman is an undergraduate SOHP communications intern. She is a sophomore UNC student from Rose Hill, North Carolina and is majoring in Public Policy, minoring in African American studies, and enrolled as a premed student.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW.

The interview went smoothly which was not expected. Generally, there would be some sort of interruption or background noise, though there was none in this case. Peterson's wife was in the seating area of the interview, but was not actively participating. She was going through some paperwork as I interviewed Dr. Peterson. Peterson was tended to elaborate on questions without much need of follow up questions. However, I didn't ask many follow-up questions that would've given a deeper understanding of his background and family life. The interview was focused mainly on higher education and the lack of support systems. He even said in the interview that integration was detrimental to the support systems that black students had in their previous school systems. Though, he attributed this lack of mentorship to larger, research universities, not as a reflection of racial demographics of the institution.

NOTE ON RECORDING.

This interview was scheduled directly following the Black Pioneers Panel for 2015. Originally, I didn't have a second interviewee, and Dr. Peterson offered to be the second shortly after the Black Pioneers panel.

**TRANSCRIPT—RUSSELL PETERSON**

Interviewee: RUSSELL PETERSON  
Interviewer: Destinie Pittman  
Interview Date: October 8, 2015  
Location: Chapel Hill, North Carolina  
Length: One file; approximately 58 minutes

START OF RECORDING

Destinie Pittman: This is Destinie Pittman at the Residence Inn interviewing Dr. Russell Peterson on the 8th of October, 2015. So, let's start with where you're from. How would you describe--?

Russell Peterson: Well, I guess I'm from, originally, Thomasville, North Carolina. I was born in High Point, North Carolina, but I lived in Fairmont, North Carolina for twelve years, where I went to school.

DP: Okay. How would you describe the area? Was it a small town, country?

RP: Thomasville, back when I was born, had a population of about 18,000. High Point had a population of about 40,000. Fairmont was 2,000. So, all small towns, small cities. Never had a large city experience.

DP: Okay. So, it was a very close-knit area?

RP: I thought so. Both Thomasville and High Point, and Fairmont, the communities were close-knit. We knew everybody in town, and everybody knew you, unfortunately.

[Laughter] Yeah, so--. Yeah, both black and white. Everybody knew everybody. Yeah, in all towns, yes.

DP: So, was it a segregated area?

RP: Very much so. In Thomasville, it was segregated. High Point, of course, was segregated. Fairmont was very segregated, because in Fairmont, there were three indigenous populations: white, black, and Native American, and the movie theater was divided into-- the whites sat downstairs, and the balcony was divided with a partition down the front: black people were on one side, and Indians were on the other side, so it was very segregated, at first, up until the early 60s.

DP: So, your area was mostly black, the part you lived in?

RP: Yes, in Thomasville, the area was all black, that I lived in. In High Point, that area, Kivett Drive, that was all black. In Fairmont, the area was all black, but by being so small, the interaction between all three indigenous groups was more than in Thomasville or High Point, or Greensboro, yeah. In fact, our best friends in Fairmont were black and Native American. Alton Hunt was the Indian, and of course [E.R. Gauls] was a good friend of ours. He was black, yeah.

DP: So, tell me about your family when you were growing up.

RP: Okay, see, my father grew up in Northern Neck part of Virginia. He had to go to Virginia State University to finish high school, because back then--and we're talking about 19-- late 1920s, early 1930s--black people in Northern Neck part of Virginia, in that county, couldn't go to high school. They had no high school. So he had to go to Virginia State University in Petersburg to finish high school. He left there and went to North Carolina A&T to finish college. Then he got his master's degree in education from University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

My mother--we just found out--we didn't know that she finished high school in Winston-Salem, and she went to college at Shaw University, and she got a Master's in library science at Atlanta University, and they worked together for, oh, all their lives. My grandfather-- My

grandparents on my father's side were farmers. She never worked, he farmed. On my mother's side, she lost her parents. They were dead by the time she was seventeen years old. I had first cousins in High Point. In fact, the lady in High Point, Gwen Peterson, was like a big sister to me, because Mama and Daddy sent her to A&T, she finished A&T. In fact, one year, she was Miss A&T. So, we had a very close relationship with her in High Point.

My mother's family was all but--. My mother had an aunt that was like a grandmamma to me. Her name was Alice Arthur, but we called her Ali, and she died at ninety-four, but she died at ninety-four cooking breakfast for the family, and she saved me from many a disciplinary action from my father. Most of my family were in education. All my first cousins were, one was principal at--. Education, education, yeah. Most of them, yeah. So, that was the family background.

DP: Okay. Was church a big part of your upbringing?

RP: Yes. Let me see. The saying was, "If you can't go to church, you can't do anything else." Daddy was a deacon at the church, and Momma accompanied the choir, and everything. So, yeah, church was a big part, both in Thomasville, and Fairmont, it was a big part of our lives. In fact, the thing I looked forward to in the summertime was Vacation Bible School, enjoyed it immensely. And, because Daddy loved church, and because Momma loved to play the piano for the choir, and everything.

DP: What church did you attend?

RP: Let's see. In Thomasville, it was First Baptist Church. Reverend Foster was the pastor. And in Fairmont, it was First Baptist Church, Reverend J. J. Thompson. He became the mayor of Fairmont, and eventually became an Assembly member for the state of North Carolina. Yeah, that's right, yeah.

DP: So, let's go more into education, starting with your elementary school.

RP: Well, I went to all of my pre-college education was in Rosenwald School in Fairmont, North Carolina, which, Daddy was the principal, and believe me, you learn to get along with people when your Daddy is the principal of the school, and so, I skipped the first grade, because they wanted me to skip the second grade, but Daddy wouldn't allow it, because he said I would be too young, because back then when I started I went to kindergarten. Of course, I was kicked out, but you don't have to tell that.

But, I could read by the time I hit first grade, but the kids in that little small farming town, they couldn't do anything. And, I scored high on the test, so they skipped me to second grade. They wanted to go to third grade, but Daddy said no, so I started out in the second grade. So all of my pre-college education was done at Rosenwald School in Fairmont, North Carolina, from the second grade to the twelfth grade.

DP: And it was an all-black school.

RP: Oh yes, all black. It was all black. Fairmont had three school systems: a black school system, a white school system, and a Native American school system. And, my sister was in the first graduating class after integration, in--. When did Janet finish, honey, do you remember?

Poinsettia Peterson: No, I can't remember when she finished.

RP: But anyway, Daddy had retired, but they brought, they asked him, would he come out of retirement to help them integrate the school, and so right now, Rosenwald, the school that I attended, is now the elementary school for the city. The Native American school is the primary school, and they built a new high school, so everybody goes to the high school. In fact, we just got back from Fairmont about two weeks ago? About two weeks ago, yeah. They honored my

father and my mother for forty-two years of service down there, with a parade, and E. L. Peterson Day and all that.

DP: What was a most influential incidents from your pre-college experience?

RP: Influential?

DP: Well, education pre-college?

RP: I can't--. I'm trying to think of--. There was no one incident. What I remember most about coming up before college was that I had very, very good friends--I mean, very close friends, and these friends, we got along very well together. And of course, I played basketball. They talk about, having that shot from the corner. My shot was pretty good from the corner, too. But I always got along with the teachers and the friends. I just had a nice time, a good time. There was no one incident.

The thing that I remember most was that in--, see, I graduated in 1961, so in the summer of 1960, NASA, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, sent students who they considered had promise, on various institutes, and I went to North Carolina Central. It was North Carolina College at the time. There I met Otto White, who was one of the pioneers here, and of course, I met Dorita Cogdale, who went to school with my wife at UNCG, and I met all other people, and had a nice time. We spent six weeks there, and we took chemistry, and biology, and physics, and math, and we had a good time, had a good time, and I learned a little bit about college life there. So, it prepared me more for Carolina than anything else.

DP: What made you decide to go to college?

RP: Well, in my family, it was never an issue. We assumed everybody was going to college. All of my relatives, there was never any discussion about "if you're going to college." The discussion was about, "Where are you going?" I mean, it was assumed that once you



finished high school, you went to college. I mean, it was never--. It wasn't an issue, it was just something you naturally did. It's like getting up in the morning and eating breakfast. When you graduated, you went off to college, period.

DP: Why did you choose UNC?

RP: Money. I only applied to five schools when I was a senior. I applied to Wake Forest, Duke, Carolina, Howard, and Fisk. Wake Forest wrote me back and said they weren't integrated. Big deal. Duke wrote me back and said they were only integrated at their graduate level. Fisk wanted me to write a ten-page autobiography of my life, and I told them I ain't lived that long, so I wasn't going to write that, so it was down to Howard and Carolina. Howard accepted me, and Carolina accepted me. Howard was more expensive than Carolina, plus I preferred a smaller town than a larger town, but Carolina wrote me back and said, "We accept you, but because of your low SAT scores--." Because I got something like fourteen to fifteen hundred, it was pretty high. But anyway, they said, "You probably would not have success at Carolina." Nobody tells me what I can't do. Not only did I have success at Carolina, but I went on and got everything else out the way, but--. And back then, including room and board--not food, but room and board, and tuition, the fee for the whole year was \$1,300, and that was much cheaper than Howard, and anything else. But that was it. I didn't realize what I had gotten myself into, until my parents put me out. What's the big auditorium there on the main campus? Is it?

DP: Is it Kenan?

RP: Not Kenan. Well I forgot what auditorium. It's where they had the freshman orientation. Two thousand of us went there, and I looked around, and I said, "Oh my God, all these white people." [Laughter] "What have I done?" But, it was no big deal. At that time, that's why I chose Carolina. It wasn't--at that time, the idea that I was, say, breaking ground, or being a

pioneer, hadn't really entered my mind. It was just something that I thought that you did, but the newspaper in Thomasville had a big headline: "Thomasville Negro Goes to UNC." I said, "Really?"

But, there were only five people in my freshman class, and the five people you saw in the program? Those were they. Five people out of two thousand. And no women. In fact, Karen Parker transferred after her sophomore year at UNCG, and she was the first woman that Carolina--. You couldn't, women, during my time, women couldn't go to Carolina unless they were from Chapel Hill, or they majored in allied health science, and that was the only reason. Everybody else had to go to the women's college at the University of North Carolina. That's where Poinsettia went. Because, you couldn't--they wouldn't allow--, you couldn't go to UNC.

DP: What were some of the experiences being one of the few black people on campus?

RP: Dr. Hoover and I were talking about that today, and, we didn't have any real negative experiences. I had, I guess, two experiences that I can recall. One was in French. I took French, the third course in French, and I scored on one test something like a seventy-something, I don't know what it was, and the teacher looked at me, and said, "Oh, for you, this is okay." And that upset me. And I said, "No one--what do you mean, 'For you, it's okay?'" So, on the next test, I remember I got a ninety-something, because I really studied, but that wasn't my major, and I didn't want to study French that hard.

I wanted to show him that I could ace his course if I really put my mind to it. And, the whole time he lectured, he looked--. I was, of course, the only black person in his class, as I was in most of my classes, but the whole time he lectured, he looked right straight at me. Every time. I remember him.

DP: How many people were in the class?

RP: Oh, about thirty. And he looked at me the whole time. So I wanted to show him that, yeah, I could do anything I wanted to. And the second thing that happened to me was that I took Russian history. I know I had an A in the course. But I got a B. And I tried to find the professor. To this day, I can't find him. I don't know where he is. I hope the SOB is dead. No, sorry. I can't say that. But, I mean, he can't do that! I think he really was racist. I really do, because I know I had an A going into the final--, and I don't--. And I aced my final, so I know that it wasn't--. In philosophy, I got a D. I deserved that. Well, I didn't deserve a D, but the philosophy instructor wanted us to think like he did, and I would tell him, no one tells me how to think. And I told him, "Ah, I think like I think." So, but he wanted us to think, and so, the whole time I was in the philosophy course, he never thought I could measure up to his standards, and, to this day, if I had to do it over again, I'd do the same thing. I would never measure up to his standards, because I thought his standards sucked, to be quite frank with you. But, those were the only two incidents that really were negative. Most of the incidents I had were, say, neutral or positive. I can't think of anything that--.

DP: So, you didn't have any negative run-ins with other students?

RP: No. In fact--. No, mmm. It was--. The only thing I had expected--. I expected that the people, the white students and I would have close relationships with, would be from the North. Totally different. The students, the white students I had close relationships with were from the South. I had--. I forgot Charlie's name, from Charlotte, and another guy, Joe Seymour, from Decatur, Georgia. We became very good friends, and the people from the North, like New York, ignored us.

DP: Why do you think that was?

RP: I don't know. I think that, I really think the reason is that in the South, even now, even though there was segregation, people still talked. I knew everybody--. Say, in my hometown, even though it was segregated, we knew everybody. In the North, no one talked. No one knew anybody. So I think that was part of the reason. I really do. Even now, I prefer going to North Carolina, South Carolina and talking to people than I like going places like New York, and Connecticut, up North. We have friendlier relationships. In fact, the former mayor of Wilmington used to come out when we would go down to North Carolina, used to come up to the house, and sit down and talk with us there all the time, so I think that was the reason. People in the South just talk to each other. We know each other. Back in, we'd go, well, we'd go to move to North Carolina, like Winnabow, which is outside Wilmington. Everybody knows everybody. They know everybody in town. And they're friendlier. A lot friendlier.

DP: What was your major in undergrad?

RP: Zoology. Yeah, in fact, I majored in zoology. Larry Poe majored in zoology. In fact, Larry Poe and I took invertebrate zoology together and genetics together. Dr. Hoover majored in chemistry, and we took physical chemistry together, and we taught them a lesson. We tried to blow up the lab. To this day, I don't know what happened. We were doing something with a mix of benzene and something else. All of a sudden, boom, there was fire everywhere. We don't know. To this day, fifty years later, I don't know what happened. I couldn't explain it. But there was fire everywhere.

DP: What were some of the things that you were involved in on campus?

RP: Well, I guess, in terms of activities, I guess intramural athletics was a big part, because we did basketball all the time, and student government, I guess the academic affairs committee was the only thing that I did when I was on campus, and that was it, mostly

basketball, and intramural sports, and then academic affairs committee for student government. Yeah, that was about it--. And that's all I had time for, because most of the time you spent studying. In fact, what was the name of the--. I forgot the name of the big, the main library on campus.

DP: Davis, or is it Wilson?

RP: Wilson, right beside the new undergraduate library, that's Wilson? Okay, and I'm sure the Pine Room is not there, but the canteen or the snack room was called the Pine Room at that time. Is it still--?

DP: No.

RP: It was right beside--. It was in the basement of Lenoir Hall, and that's where I would leave Wilson library, and go to the Pine Room, about eleven or twelve o'clock at night to get my usual midnight snack of four hot dogs and a quart of milk, before I went to the dormitory. But, that's all I had time for, because most of the time, I spent, I guess, at night, studying. I studied at least four or five hours a night, just to make it. You had to. You had to--, just couldn't make it otherwise. That's where I met my wife, because of my eating habits.

DP: Your wife is also a UNC--.

RP: Yeah, she went to women's college, at UNCG. But I met her when she came to UNC for summer school, and used to pass in front of my dormitory, throw rocks at my window. [Laughter] She claims she doesn't do it, but I know she did. That's where I met--. Remember Willie Cooper? That summer, Larry Poe and I, and Willie Cooper, we were in front of the dormitory--, I don't know the name, I forgot the name of it, but it was a dormitory right beside the old football stadium, right down from the old baseball stadium, right down from Lenoir Hall. And, yeah, we actively tried to get Willie to go into basketball, but like Willie said, unless you

make the first team, you aren't going to--, your chance of making pros are slim, especially with Dean Smith's basketball team. And he was there the whole time I was there. In fact, he was a member of the church that Otto and I joined when we got to Chapel Hill, Brinkley--. I'm sorry, Binkley Memorial Baptist Church. We both joined that our freshman year, because they used to have services in, we called it Y Court, Gerard Hall. And, then they built the church out, yeah. But we were first. In fact, we were probably the first two African-American members of the Southern Baptist Convention, and which--. The Southern Baptist Convention pitched a hissy fit, to have these two African-Americans join them. Of course, they kicked Binkley out then--, the Southern Baptist Convention, but they were in the American Baptist Convention, so it didn't make a difference.

DP: Could you go more into the opposition you had, being one of the first members of the Southern Baptist Convention?

RP: Well, you never really felt it, because by Binkley being a part of the American Baptist Convention, we never felt any need to participate in anything, but the Southern Baptist Convention, Otto and I and four other students from the Baptist student union, all of us drove to Green Lake, Wisconsin, to the American Baptist Convention. It was nice. And then, when I moved to Washington, and the church I belonged to was part of what, the Progressive National Baptist Convention? I think so, yeah. So, I never felt it, but not being a part of the Southern Baptist Convention never affected my life one bit of it. In fact, I wouldn't have joined it anyway. Now, the church I belong to is a part of the Southern Baptist Convention, but the head of the Southern Baptist Convention is African-American, and they're trying, but still in the back of my mind, I still feel that they aren't really on board yet.

DP: What did you go into with your zoology degree?

RP: With my zoology degree? Let's see here. At first, I wanted to go to med school, but then, I worked in a hospital laboratory in Greensboro, and I found out I hated to mess with patients, and I figured a doctor shouldn't feel that way, so I went to graduate school, and got my master's and PhD from Howard University, and then, for the next twenty-five years--. No, I guess twenty-five, twenty-nine, thirty years, I taught biology in colleges around the country--, I mean, in the area.

My first job was at American University in D.C., and then I went to Cheyney University, and then I went to Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and I was there for twenty-three years, but the thing I liked about IUP--we called it IUP--is that we taught human anatomy. Well, I taught human anatomy to nurses, and anatomy and physiology to nurses and safety science people, but the thing I liked about it is that the other person who taught human anatomy to nurses also got his PhD from Howard, so Howard University controlled the human anatomy department for nurses at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and, my goodness, we started out with teaching sixty students per semester each, and we ended up teaching 120 students in four courses, because the school of nursing expanded, big time, because they started offering, first, a recertification program, and then they started offering a PhD program in nursing, and it shot off.

And so, pretty soon, all of my time just went into teaching human anatomy for nurses. I mean, I didn't have time to do anything else, and it was cadaver-based, so we always went to the University of Pittsburgh and got our cadavers, brought them back to IUP, and there we were. Of course, a lot of people, I've known students who just sat there and looked at the cadaver and didn't do anything. [Laughter] But that was okay. We enjoyed it.

DP: You said you found out you didn't like working with patients face to face. What made you want to go to med school before then?

RP: Mostly because my parents assumed I would go to med school. I mean, it was not something that I initially decided, it was something it was assumed I would do. And when I actually got in the position to make a decision, I found out I didn't like it. I mean, that's not what I wanted to do. I would, I loved to stay in the lab, and mess around, and that's what I did. I would go on the floor sometime there, and it wasn't my thing. It wasn't my thing, I enjoyed staying in the lab, and fiddling around with machines, getting machines ready for work, and everything. I enjoyed that.

DP: Okay. Your master's is in public health?

RP: Everything's in zoology. A bachelor's in zoology, a master's in zoology, and my PhD is in zoology. I've taken one botany course in my life, and that was one botany course too many. [Laughter]

DP: So, how do you think your experiences before UNC shaped how you are right now? Did you have any teachers that were prominent in your development?

RP: Well, I think that what has happened by my parents being in the same school where I went; Daddy was a principal, Momma was a librarian. I developed an aptitude for getting along with people, and when I hit high school, the teachers knew that anything they did would never get back to Daddy. I would never--. Because I would go out to, I would drink beer, teenager stuff like that, but it never got back to Daddy. I would never tell him anything. And they knew this, and so--. And the students knew that, and I guess that was a survival technique, but I learned how to get along with people, because I was a class president from my freshman class in high school and my junior class in high school. I was vice president for the sophomore class.

The senior class, I wasn't anything, because me and my girlfriend started a boycott in the cafeteria. The cafeteria was on our campus, but it was not a part of my father's administration.



But, we--. Daddy said the community thought it was, so he said, "Son, stop the boycott." So, I convinced my girlfriend at the time that we had to stop it, so, I wasn't elected to--. I ran for dogcatcher. Nah, no. Nothing. The cafeteria's still standing, too. But, that was a--. I think that's both the value of my upbringing, learning how to get along with people. It served me well.

DP: Would you think that holds true for UNC having a place in your development?

RP: Well, when I look back, UNC--. I had, as far as I was concerned, I learned a lot at UNC, because with my zoology major, we had thirty-one hours of chemistry, and, English and everything, I learned a lot. But the thing about being in such an abject minority--because when I came, there were only, there were less than thirty African-Americans on campus, and when I graduated, there may have been more, but the prejudice is, sometimes, it's subtle, and while I had the knowledge, I didn't have the confidence.

DP: What do you mean?

RP: I didn't feel that I could--. I had the knowledge, but I feel like I could do anything with it. After I finished Howard, I felt there was nothing I couldn't do. All my classes at American University were--oh, they were 100 percent white. My classes at Cheyney were mostly black. My classes at IUP were about ninety-nine percent white. And, the faculty at IUP, there were only ten percent of us, out of seven hundred faculty, only about seventy were African-Americans, and in that environment, Carolina prepared me for that environment, and Howard gave me the confidence to do it. I mean, I think there wasn't anything I couldn't do, and I did--, well, I did it. I mean, I felt there was nothing I couldn't do, because I was elected by them at IUP, to the university senate, I was elected to the undergraduate curriculum committee, I was elected to the university-wide tenure committee, I was elected to the sabbatical leave committee. All these were elected positions. I had to be elected by the faculty. And everybody knew me on

campus, because I get around.

And the greatest thing was, I played racquetball, and I would go to the rec center about six o'clock in the morning, and I played against the president, the vice-president, the provost, all the big people on campus were there, so, I mean, I knew everybody on campus. I enjoyed it. The provost always served us--she would have us over for meetings, and dinner, and she always served us salmon. I don't like salmon. But I enjoyed it, at IUP. I enjoyed it. I would do it again--if you could cut out the meetings, and all that. Fine, yeah. I enjoyed it. I enjoyed Carolina. I mean, it was what it was. As we were talking today, when we were so low in numbers, we were no threat to anybody. The turmoil started when our numbers increased, and we became a threat. I mean, when you had only five people, five or six black people on campus, we were no threat, but when we got to 200, and walked around in groups, we became a threat.

DP: What kind of turmoil occurred?

RP: The big thing on campus was getting an increase in pay for the cafeteria workers. I mean, that was huge. We were talking about that today, but the people that were--see, I graduated in 1965, but that started in like 1967, 1968, and that time, so that's when we got some turmoil, and the Black Student Movement started, and all that, in 1967, 1968, and that's when numbers of African-American students started increasing, and the whole atmosphere changed. That was 1968, and I remember the atmosphere changed in DC too, because that's where I was, in DC. Because that was the time of the Freedom Bus riders in the South, and Stokely Carmichael's Southern Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and the Congress of Racial Equality, and the Black Panther movement, and all that--that was all in the late 60s, early 70s, so, yeah, that's--those really were turbulent times, right after the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Act was passed. Oh yeah, those were turbulent times.

DP: Did y'all have demonstrations on campus?

RP: Not at Carolina. At Howard, yeah. They burned down ROTC building--burned all--yeah, burned it down. That was in 1968, 1969, yeah. Oh, yes--that was, like I say, it was--in fact, I was coming out--I was leaving a seminar at the Smithsonian to go see Poinsettia down at Wilmington. And I couldn't get back to DC, because they had installed curfews, and anything that would get me back, any bus that would get me back to DC was out the--doing non-curfew hours, would leave during the curfew there, so I was stuck down in Whiteville for two, three weeks. Of course, I didn't mind it, but I was stuck down there. I made the best of it, yeah, I made the best of it.

DP: So, you mentioned that UNC gave you the knowledge and Howard gave you the confidence. How do you think that Howard gave you the confidence where UNC couldn't?

RP: Well, at UNC, during that time, the professors gave you the knowledge, but not the encouragement. Where at Howard, the instructors gave you knowledge, but they gave you the encouragement. They really backed you--you could do anything you wanted to, and, yeah, that was why. That was why. I know--you had a great support system. That was it. It was greater than--there was no support--well, the support system at Carolina during that time, when I entered, was mainly through other undergraduates and graduates. We supported each other.

The support system didn't come from the faculty. It didn't come from the faculty. In fact, I'm not sure how much support you get now from the faculty. What I see now is that integration has destroyed the mentoring and advisor system for many of our African-American students. In high school, even though we didn't have the equipment and the money and everything that the white school had, you had a support system. The teachers really supported you, and gave you encouragement, and I'm not sure that happens now. In fact, I know it doesn't happen.

In fact, at IUP, we had to start our own mentoring program, and really make it work, because a lot of African-American students, if you got A's and B's, they'd accuse you of trying to act white. And so we started a mentoring program, and we partnered with many school systems around the state to really mentor these students. In fact, we were bringing students in for simulated college programs in the summertime, and give them coursework, and also strategies for success in college, to help them get through. In fact, my daughter went to IUP, and I worked for the dean in the College of Natural Science, and told him--I said, "I know it's illegal for me to be involved in my daughter's education, but I'm an advisor. Even though it won't be official--but I will be the advisor. I will watch her all the way," and to this day, she doesn't know that I know every grade she ever got--everything. And, it worked out--I'm glad I did that, because her advisor in psychology screwed up, and she would not have graduated on time.

DP: How did they--with scheduling?

RP: No, they didn't give her credit for a course she had taken. So, I went up to the dean's office--and she was in the College of Natural Science--and we sat and went over her transcript. We sat down, and went over her transcript course by course by course, and I told him, "She took the course." Because I know she took the course. It was anatomy and physiology, and I knew she took it. And, in fact, I said--but, the thing that really--and Poinsettia and I discuss it--how many other students fall through the cracks, because their parents or teachers aren't aware of all these things. And that's what has happened--and a lot of these professors who are not from minority areas, minority backgrounds, really don't care.

I guess it's the sign of the times. You have to be your--in fact, Poinsettia wouldn't have graduated if she hadn't read her own--her advisor almost screwed her up. You really have to be your own advocate these days. You have to read everything, and work out everything. You have

to know what you're doing, because people will screw you over. I mean, there were--especially in some of--even at Carolina today, I bet you there are professors on campus that will--I mean, I'm sure that's cynical, but they'll screw you. I just know it. I don't think they're different from anybody at Penn State, or--I did my post-doc up at Woods Hole at the Marine Biology Laboratory. Yeah, they don't care. All they want to do is write the grants, get the money, and publish papers, and students go to hell. So you really have to be your own advocate. That's somewhat cynical, but that's the way it is.

DP: And you think that's general for PWIs, in relation to HBCUs?

RP: That's an attitude you're going to find in a large research-oriented university, like Duke, Carolina, State, Harvard, Yale--I mean, Stanford, Chicago--these large research-oriented universities. I mean, they're on the forefront of all the research, but for a student to go there, you really have to know what you're doing. You really have to be your own advocate. The smaller schools, the teachers take more of an interest in the students, but the problem with the smaller schools is the teachers don't make any money. That's the problem you're having.

We've had teachers apply--professors apply at IUP. We had one guy apply from--I've forgot the, some small school, Francis & Mary University in Florida or South Carolina. He was teaching four courses, and he was making something like \$40,000 a year, and this was about five, six years ago. That's no money. And, then he wanted us--now, for us, we only taught two courses, and the average starting salary for an assistant professor is about \$70,000. So, I mean, that's what you're up against. So, we tell students now, "Know what you're doing. You have to be your own advisor. You have to be your own advocate." And that's true. I mean, I've seen it so many times, --that's what has to happen.

There were students in my class--there was one guy in my class, I remember he played

football, and the coach said--I forgot his name--the coach told me, "How can you understand him? He stutters all the time." The guy never stuttered in my class. In fact, the kids loved him. He led all the--we had a lot of field trips and stuff. He led those. He did fine! I see him in the grocery stores now. He's a wonderful person. It's just that no one took the interest in him, and he didn't--that affected him.

DP: Well, I've already answered--all of my questions have been answered, but do you have anything else you would like to say about--

RP: No, I think I've said everything. I think the mistake that a lot of African-American students make, falling through the cracks, is that, like I said, they don't become their own advocate. You really have to know what you're doing. Read the bulletin, know what it takes to graduate, know how many hours you need. For example, take Poinsettia. She needed the last thirty hours--the regulation was, the last thirty hours of coursework had to be taken at UNCG. Well, she couldn't do that. But if she had not gotten a waiver for that by going to the administration, she wouldn't have graduated--because she came to Carolina her last semester there--I know just to be with me. [Laughter] Of course, she'll deny that. And, you can stay as long as you want to, because, I probably don't want stay in this room. [Laughter]

But, that's it--you have to be your own advocate. I remember when I was here, there was the one history professor. His nickname was Blackjack McCloud. I don't know what his real name was. But our advisor--and we were told that if you ever got in his class, drop it, because African-Americans couldn't get anything over a D. And, we were told this, and one of the people that entered the university with me didn't believe it. He said, "He can't give me a D!" He got a D. So, these things you have to know--talk to other students. The best advisors--I learned this doing registration--my daughter, who went to IUP, said, "Daddy, do you know where the advice

for registration is?” I said, “No.” On the bathroom walls--students had written on the bathroom walls what courses to take, what professors to avoid, and all that. I said, “Really?” And that’s--a lot of times, your fellow classmates are your best advisors, and other students always--, just talk to other students. ‘So, what do you think about this teacher?’ And they’ll be honest. I understand there are websites that now rate--I would--I looked at them, but I would ask other students who go there. They take the same courses that you’ll be taking. “What do you think about this one?” You aren’t trying to necessarily find the easiest course--sometimes you are--but you’re trying to find those professors that are very fair, and what I found is that, I don’t care how hard your course is, if you’re fair in your treatment of people, no problem. But if you aren’t fair, that’s when the trouble starts.

DP: Okay. That was it. Thank you.

RP: Okay. Honey, we’re going to have to learn how to work one of these smartphones.

END OF INTERVIEW

Edited by Lauren Bellard

November 3, 2016