

Transcript – Karen E. McLaurin, class of 1973

Narrator: Karen E. McLaurin
Interviewer: Mary Murphy
Interview Date: September 21, 2018
Interview Time:
Location:
Length: 1 audio file; 32:15

Karen McLaurin-Chesson: [00:00] So, you give me the sign when, you know, what I have left, time left.

Mary Murphy: Yup, I'll give you a ten-minute and a five minute. OK, good morning.

KMC: Good morning, Mary.

MM: So, my name is Mary Murphy, and I'm the Nancy L. Buc Pembroke Center archivist. And I'm here this morning taking an interview with a member of Brown University alumnae community who is back on campus for the all-class Black Alumni Reunion, which is a very exciting event. So I'll have my first interviewee introduce herself now, and we'll begin in conversation.

KMC: And my name is Karen McLaurin-Chesson, from the Class of 1974. And I'm delighted to be here.

MM: Thank you so much for taking the time to join us. So today as I mentioned before we started, this is really your interview. So why don't we start from the beginning, [01:00] unless you have points that you've already noted to bring in and to discuss. Why don't we begin just telling me a little bit about your background, and what brought you to Brown University.

KMC: What brought me to Brown. Actually, it was Pembroke. When I originally applied, I applied to Pembroke.

MM: That's right. Because you were part of the merger years.

KMC: Yes. And I had come down for Spring Weekend. I believe I had also had an interview, and I had the most wonderful time. I felt like the campus was safe. I felt like this would be a wonderful home for me. And I had a wonderful visit. The interview went well. [02:00] I was convinced after the interview that I was a candidate to enter Brown as a student and I was just thrilled; I felt wonderful, but it wasn't until I got my letter that I was thrilled to come here. But as an undergraduate, well, pre –

MM: Can I stop you? Where were you born and raised, predominantly?

KMC: OK. I was born in Roxbury, Massachusetts, and as of the age of seven, we had moved to the South Shore of Boston, Rockland, Mass. I attended Notre Dame Academy, but when I first arrived to Rockland, I was in the public schools until the seventh grade. [03:00] Then I went to Notre Dame. And as a high school student I was really engaged in community activities. You might say, like what? [laughter] Like SNCC, and CORE, and the Black Panthers, which were all male-dominated efforts. But it was great to integrate my views and initiatives.

MM: How did you become involved in those organizations as a young woman?

KMC: Well quite frankly, my mother used to work in Roxbury. So, I looked in that area for community engagements. Although, going to a parochial school, [04:00] we had what was called "apostolic work" which I did on the South Shore working with disabled, mentally and physically-disabled young people. And I also shared my time for apostolic work with SNCC, CORE, and the Panthers; they were all right next to each other. I walked in, I said I want to volunteer, what projects do you have, and interviewed them. And saw how my interests meshed with their efforts, and –

MM: How many other – do you recall the number of – Were there other women there at the time?

KMC: There were a few, but mostly men. Mostly men. And young men. So, I did that for a couple of years, and then I kind of branched out; I began to work with daycares, [05:00] because in the '70s, that's when daycares were being initiated, actually. And I wanted to work with a diverse population of young people, and that was what was going on in the daycare which was right across the street from SNCC, CORE, and the Panthers. So I shared my time –

MM: Were they affiliated, those daycare programs at all?

KMC: No, no. And as a high school student, I also participated in the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts and took ballet lessons, and drama; theater. I also worked with Boston housing in relocating, helping to relocate elderly people who were in, you know, really dilapidated housing, and relocating them [06:00] into a new structure that was not far from –

MM: So that was during Boston hardcore urban renewal era–

KMC: Yes.

MM: Yes, I'm familiar with that history, right.

KMC: Yes. And I think that's what attracted Brown to me, being a young person from junior high to high school, working with community organizations, they saw potential. So prior to entering Pembroke, Brown, I attended the TSP program, which was called the Transitional Summer Program. And during that era, one would call it a remedial program. I was an average student and it was interesting because the woman [07:00] in the admission office told me, very clearly, "You are an outstanding candidate. You'd be wonderful for the TSP program. But there's one thing: you're gonna have to pay if you want to come to Brown." [laughter] And interesting enough, coming down here, that was like my first time leaving the state of Massachusetts without my parents.

MM: Yes. Did you take the train?

KMC: I drove down.

MM: You drove down, OK.

KMC: And, that was also a new adventure for me.

MM: I'm sure, yeah.

KMC: [laughter] But it was very safe and fun-filled. But TSP was a very supportive environment. I believe I came in at the end of June, or beginning of July, and went through August, [08:00] and it was a six-to-eight-week program. We learned how to use the computers, and had math and English and history courses. We also had the chance to be exposed to faculty, and interacted with them. And for young people who were not used to interacting with adults, I can assume it would be a challenge. But for the most part, it was fun; it was fun. And you saw where your support systems lied here at the university. And everyone, for the most part, the faculty were black. There was one black dean [09:00] who made himself known and accessible, whose name was William Brown. And actually, there might have been another dean in admissions. Nanette Jones, I think the name was. But, I was closer to the academic one. And you know, you had a chance to meet your classmates. I'd say there was about 30 or 40 of us. A lot of the people in that program were probably in the same boat I was. And I was an average student; I wasn't a straight-A student at all. But, [10:00] we all enjoyed those eight weeks together.

MM: Had your parents attended college as well?

KMC: No.

MM: OK, so you're first generation?

KMC: I was first-gen, yeah. Actually, my sister was in college. And she transferred from Long Island – what was it, C.W. Post, and went to design school. But at any rate, so this wonderful summer experience also, you know, part of my lifeline was always associating with volunteerism

and community service. So, I, one day I ran downtown and found Catholic Charities, and worked with them. So that was my summer [11:00] volunteerism, and unusually, it was just one thing, but also adjusting to this new campus, and new people, I gave myself a break and said, you know [laughter] don't feel bad. At least you went somewhere, and did some work. [laughter]

As an undergraduate student, having learned the campus by the time everybody else came and having undergone orientation, pre-orientation and orientation, I felt like I was ready to roll. I had, at that time, identified who my mentors would be in the chaplain's office and in the dean's office. And interesting enough, Dean Brown, William Brown, he said now Karen, you know that they have research opportunities in [12:00] Sociology Department, and if you're interested, and I was interested in sociology –

MM: Yeah, I can see how that would be a good fit.

KMC: Yes. And it was. I was surprised the chair hired me right after the interview. I'd already had another job. But it would being a research assistant that allowed me to, A, be around my mentor who was in the Soc. Department, and B, gain some research skills that I could apply to my undergraduate experience, and C, also getting people who could get to know who Karen McLaurin was, and be able to write recs for summer jobs and that kind of stuff. [laughter] So the orientation that I had was [13:00] wonderful.

MM: Would you consider it a highlight of your time at Brown?

KMC: Yes, I would. That was the highlight of my –

MM: Good, I want to make sure that we talk about highlights, and maybe if there's other more challenging memories that you have, but a strong highlight.

KMC: OK, a challenging memory. I had a graduate student who was a professor, well, assistant professor, in our class, one of my required courses. And I guess our chemistry just didn't jive. His philosophy and my philosophy were two different philosophies. He wanted to fail me, and I raced to Dean Brown and said, you know, this is not right. I say the sun is out; everybody [14:00]

sees the sun out, and he says, no, it's gray, and it's about ready to rain. And his philosophy for urban, I think it was urban planning, and his philosophy was very different than mine. He wasn't concerned about what the people need or want. He was more concerned about presenting his own agenda. So it was a difficult class for me; that was the only class –

MM: And specifically, do you remember which class it was?

KMC: I think it was Urban Cities. Not Urban Planning, Urban Cities. And having grown up in one that was at one time very diverse –

MM: And worked on housing.

KMC: And yes, having worked on housing – [15:00] don't let me mislead you; I wasn't a know-it-all. I was like a sponge at Brown where I was able and wanted to absorb as much information to make me academically successful one, but two, a better person. So, that was –

MM: And how did you get through that time?

KMC: Dean Brown picked up the phone, called the chair of the department, spoke to him about my challenges, had my work reviewed, and I passed the course.

MM: It was fine.

KMC: Yeah. But I passed it with a C, and Cs at Brown for me, that was nothing to get excited about. [16:00] But I figured that was going to be one battle that I partially won, and that fellow never finished here at Brown, by the way. But anyway, on the highlight side, research opportunities and skills helped me as I did my thesis. And what I also liked about Brown, and it was my experience, remember, I entered in '70.

MM: Yes. Great transition.

KMC: And that was after the '68 walkout. And those young people were having greater challenges than I did. So, they kind of paved the way, paved the way in terms of cultivating conversations [17:00] with administrators and documenting things and that was another highlight for me at Brown. People listened to you. They cared about your voice, and they wanted you to have one.

MM: Do you feel that was a direct legacy of the work of the Pembroke women?

KMC: Yeah.

MM: In leadership during the walkout?

KMC: Yes, I do, I do. And you know, I think that there were a couple of transitions going on there, you know, the women merging with the male administration. I think that –

MM: Did you, I'm sorry to interrupt, did you feel there was a feminism to it? Did you feel that there was a Women's Movement that was a strain of that [18:00] that threaded through the women who led the walkout?

KMC: I think – yes, yes. And actually, one of the student leaders was, and still is, a dear friend of mine, Sheryl Brissett-Chapman. She was like a big sister to me when I was here in undergraduate school. And that was another thing: the women cared – we had what was called the Big Brother, Big Sister program, and I had big sisters. [laughter] And my big sister – well Sheryl was the best big sister, yeah. She's always stepped up. And I knew of her before I came to Brown. She went to Girls' Latin and I knew other people who were there too.

MM: Was she already seen as a leader [19:00] and involved in Civil Rights activities at all?

KMC: You know, something, through my engagement, I never knew of her, no. And it was, once I came to Brown, I knew of her, but then I had a personal connection with her. And you know, quite frankly, the Afro Society was always run by men here at Brown. But the good news was

that they listened, and they appreciated women, female voices, and actually it was through one of the Afro Society meetings that I had – we were trying to figure out a name for Black seniors, and I was a little ignorant; [20:00] I never realized that onyx came in many colors. I thought that black was onyx, so that's how I call, I named the Black senior celebration Onyx. And years later learned that Onyx wasn't just [laughter] black. And they changed the ring. We had an onyx filigree ring for my year, and I was so thrilled. It was beautiful.

MM: Do you still have that?

KMC: It got stolen.

MM: That's a lovely archival object.

KMC: Oh, I loved it. It was embossed with the Brown seal, and it had filigree on the sides. It was gorgeous. It was so beautiful.

MM: That'd be really neat to have in our – I want to give you the heads up, we've got about [21:00] ten minutes to go.

KMC: OK, all right. So my Brown experience, that was the only challenge during my Brown experience. I also felt empowered as a student because there were administrators who wanted to work with students who had great ideas. And a classmate of mine and I did a proposal for the ACI. I might add that the Adult Correctional Institution at that time was mostly male, and you might also remember in the early '70s, they were talking about correctional reform. So I wanted to start a GED program, and my classmate wanted to do creative writing; she felt like, you know, Black men, they're oppressed, [22:00] men [laughter] who were in prison can let their creative juices flow. So she did the creative writing part of it, and I did the GED part of it. The Chaplain's office provided us with the GED books, and a car, so then, after the first year, we started making it a work-study opportunity for other people here at Brown. And that was a wonderful experience.

MM: Was that the first work that Brown University did with incarcerated Rhode Islanders basically?

KMC: Men, yeah, yeah.

MM: Because that's also a legacy that carries on almost up until the present day.

KMC: Yeah, well there are different versions of it, because I know that somebody expanded it for [23:00] women, and yeah, so that was the first.

MM: That is fascinating. That's a really important piece of history that you just shared, that's, that's, wow.

KMC: Well that was another highlight. And then, when I was here, just to capsulize, I worked with South Providence Tutorial. I had also gone back and forth from Massachusetts, worked at University Hospital, now Boston Medical Center. They had a methadone program, and one of our philosophy professors was director of the methadone program, so he got volunteers [laughter] from Brown to go up, and I did that for a year. Jesse McDade was the professor's name who directed that program. And what else? I think [24:00] that was basically it.

So, I graduated in three years, and I did that for two reasons. A, I think I sopped us as much as I could from Brown, and B, my parents were in the process of getting a divorce, and the economics were going to change. So, there was this wonderful man in the Bursar's Office, who told me, "Tell your mother to come down." See I was part of a tuition plan, so by the time, by the end of my four years, my tuition would be paid. But he took off some of the light, and he granted me my fourth year tuition. Once again, good people were here in different walks of the university. Those were my models for [25:00] when I returned, I always had the back of my mind, I want to be a dean [laughter] at Brown. I want to share the love that was shared for me when I was a student.

MM: Can I ask with the remaining time that we have that you tell us what happened with your career, or if you did choose to work, or what happened post-Brown, we have about five minutes left.

KMC: OK, post-Brown, interesting enough, I work with my husband. We have a public access show. Everywhere we travel, we bring it back to Rhode Island. And it's called *Africa Teach-In*. He's a librarian, and so we do that show, and comes on Cox and Verizon, and Tuesdays and Thursdays, so [26:00] we do that. We do a magazine, used to be called the *Pepper Bird Magazine*, now it's called *Chesson Worldwide*, and we try to advertise community businesses and give them a chance to, you know, showcase their – and encourage people to utilize their services on the one hand, and on the other hand, we always have, you know, messages and snapshots of what's been happening here in Rhode Island and elsewhere. If I can get back to my –

MM: Of course, please, yeah.

KMC: – my Brown experience as an employee, I came back in 1988, and I did five years – I did, like service. [laughter] But five years in the [27:00] Alumni Relations Office, reemerging minority alumni with the university. And that's exposing them to faculty, and students, and also the life of Brown. Then, in 1993, five years later, I applied for a dean's position in the academic part of the university, and also slash director of the Third World Center. There are two jobs in my life that allowed me to really create. My Brown jobs, and Boston Public School System. And if it weren't for my work at Boston Public School system, Brown might not have even known what I could do for our home [28:00] institution. Harold and Bernicestine Bailey, I always have to mention them because they're the reason I came back. They used to always invite me to events that they were giving.

MM: Bernicestine? Oh yes, she's very close with the Pembroke Center.

KMC: And actually, I had a college tour component that my program was called 636 Student Leadership Program for the Boston Public Schools, it was in 12 public schools.

MM: This is what you did as a professional job?

KMC: Yes, five middle schools.

MM: What was your role there at the public schools?

KMC: I was director of the Student Leadership Program, 636, which is part of the desegregation plan. So that gave me the opportunity to bring White, Asian, Latino, Black students together to work together. And faculty, [29:00] it wasn't difficult to identify faculty who wouldn't mind spending after school and weekends with their cross-cultural children. So, well one of those programs is Mock Trial. And the Mock Trial, and college tours, whitewater rafting, hiking, biking, canoeing, foster grandparent program, those were the things these young people were doing. And they also emcee'd their annual event, and showcased all their activities, giving back to the community and giving to each other. So, that was something I could bring to Brown. Bernstein and Harold, we gave them an award because they set up, bought lunches for over 60 kids [30:00] to come back to campus, and also set up the program with financial aid, admissions, tours, all that stuff.

And that's how I ended up coming back to Brown. [laughter] They had spoken, because they were active alums, with the Alumni Relations Office.

MM: Do you have any – I hate to wrap this up so quickly.

KMC: That's all right.

MM: Do you have a final thought?

KMC: My final thoughts are that being the first female director of the Third World Center was also a wonderful experience for me.

MM: And again, what year was that?

KMC: 1993 to 2010, 17 years.

MM: OK, I want to make sure we get that. Wow.

KMC: In that position. And five at the Alumni Relations Office. I've given 22 years of my life to Brown [31:00] unselfishly. I got married late. I'm still married. [laughter] Thank god. But anyway, so in the spirit of wrapping things up, I had wonderful years here at Brown. I've seen the university change, and I just pray that they remember that building a sense of unity amongst people is a critical aspect of the successful life of this university, and I pray that they continue and focus on pulling people together, letting them work together, and try not to be silo-oriented. [32:00]

MM: Thank you. Thank you for coming today, for sharing your memories. They are incredible. This is a wonderful way to kick off this weekend of interviews.

KMC: Are we having other people, I pray, coming through?

MM: Oh yes.

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