

Transcript – Markita Morris, class of 1998

Narrator: Markita Morris  
Interviewer: Mary Murphy  
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Track 1

Mary Murphy: [00:00] OK. So good morning, Markita.

Markita Morris-Louis: Good morning, Mary.

MM: [laughs] My name is Mary Murphy, and I'm the Nancy L. Buc Pembroke Center Archivist. This morning it is October 25<sup>th</sup>, and this is a new Brown Women Speak interview with a member of the Brown alumnae community. We are doing this interview this morning by FaceTime. I think maybe one of the first we've ever done this way.

MML: [laughs]

MM: So, we'll see how that rolls. So, with that, please, if you could introduce yourself for the record and we'll just go from there.

MML: OK. I am Markita Morris-Louis, class of 1998, Brown University, and I was born and raised in Philadelphia.

MM: OK. Well, thank you for joining us this morning. So, if you could, let's begin. So, we had put out the call for oral histories because of the Black Alumnae Reunion [01:00] weekend. And you responded to that call. So maybe we could just – What inclined you to respond when we did put out that call?

MML: Yeah, so I was already feeling a profound sense of history that weekend celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1968 march and walkout of black students at Brown. Which really led to, you know, increased attention for diversity, inclusion – racial diversity and inclusion – at the university. So you know, my friends and I – I have a circle of women friends who I correspond with regularly. We have been tight for the last 20 years, which is just hard to really wrap your mind around. And I passed it on to them and they were really excited, too – we were trying to get it together as a group. We wanted to kind of do this as a group. But I hope that they reach out individually at some point to have it done, as well. But it was [02:00] really important to me to kind of have our experience documented. Particularly African American women. I wanted to make sure that, you know, you've kind of got a full circle of different voices to participate in this experience. And then, you know, not just being African American, but being from, you know, inner city, having gone to public school. All of those experiences and my back – all of that, all of those things contribute to my background and really, you know, help me see Brown in a different way or, you know, uniquely shaped my experience at Brown.

MM: So that – Thank you. And that, this interview will last for just about 40 minutes, so –

MML: OK.

MM: – let's go back to the beginning, and let's talk about that. Let's talk about your family background, if you're willing share.

MML: Yep, sure.

MM: Please only share what you're willing to share. But tell me about that. Tell me about your family history a little bit, and the run-up to when you head off to college.

MML: Yeah. So, my story's really interesting. [03:00] I was the first in my immediate family to go to college. So my, you know, but I was always – I was identified as, like, the smart kid, right? Like, the kid who, you know, was self-motivated, did really well. My mom, I grew up in a family with my mom, my brother, and my younger sister. And also I had another – we called her my

sister cousin, who was very – kind of grew up with us. And my grandmother was a very strong influence. Both my grandmother and my grandfather, but my grandfather passed with I was 10. And my father was in my life until I was about 10, and then unfortunately he succumbed to drug addiction over the years and was in-and-out a little bit, but really not absent – not present during this time when I was looking for college.

So, my mother and my grandmother were my two biggest influences during that time. And my mother kind of knew early on [04:00] that I could perform academically, and so she did whatever she could to try to put me in the best situations that she could muster. Right? Given her kind of limited positive experience with education in her own life, and also her kind of limited resources. So you know, from the – I was in a mentally gifted program when – I think I was identified maybe kindergarten, first grade, or so.

MM: Oh, whoa.

MML: So, my mother – the neighborhood school, the school, you know, closest to where we lived – was just insufficient from her perspective and she didn't want me to go there. So, she basically lied for me to go to a better school that had the mentally gifted program. And it was just another neighborhood over and it, you know, would've – it was a short trolley ride from where we lived, but... You know, she used somebody's address, with their permission. And it was kind of this kind of community of people coming together saying, "No, we've got to put this kid in the best situation we can [05:00], you know, under the circumstances, to give her whatever advantage she can get." And I think, I know that – I know for a fact that that one decision helped change the trajectory of my future. Because from there, you know, going to Paul Laurence Dunbar Elementary School – which wasn't like the (inaudible) elementary school, but it was right next to Temple University. Which meant that Temple teaching students were, you know, would go to Paul Laurence Dunbar for special assignments so we got the exposure there, and then they had the mentally gifted program. And then from there I was able to go to Masterman, which is a very high-performing magnet school in Philadelphia, from fifth to twelfth grade. And that completely set me on the journey. Like, that was the place where, like, you know, that laid that foundation for me to even get to Brown. I would have never heard of a Brown University without Masterman.

So, fast-forward through high school. My senior year was a little bit tumultuous because my mother was married at the time to someone who was [06:00] very abusive. So, you know, throughout high school we were a little bit unsettled. You'd call it "housing insecure" now – now we all have the right language for it. But we moved – kind of bounced around a lot because home wasn't always the safest and most secure place to be. So, we bounced between family members and different places. And then I actually spent my senior year in high school living with my grandmother.

MM: Oh my gosh, OK.

MML: Because, you know, we just had our – it was just really tough. It was really violent in the house, and things got really bad. And then finally, like, I tried to, like, just beg my mom, like, "This is enough. This is enough. We have to go. I don't care if we're living on the street. Like, we can't continue to do this." So, she went in with an aunt of ours – my, her youngest sister. That situation wasn't the best. She didn't want me in it, so I stayed with my grandmother, and my brother and my sister were somewhere else, unfortunately. [07:00] I was feeling a lot of stress that year and, you know, just going through a lot of not having home be stable. But when – I actually wasn't going to Brown; I was going to Johns Hopkins –

MM: Oh, really? OK.

MML: – because I wanted to be a cardiologist. My heart was set on going to Johns Hopkins. When I visited Johns Hopkins, it seemed like a very miserable place. [laughter] Nobody seemed happy. All the students were like, "Yeah, we're here because it's Johns Hopkins, and you go here, you get a great degree, you move on, you go to graduate school." But nobody seemed happy with that experience. And I'd just had a really tough life. It was like, I'm not really interested in being in a place where I'm not going to be happy or find some kind of experience.

MM: So, you had visited Johns Hopkins. Did you –

MML: I had visited Johns Hopkins.

MM: – go, like, on a little college tour, or...?

MML: Yeah, yeah.

MM: And as you get towards college, was it a guidance counselor that started kind of focusing your options with you, or did you just kind of find that on your own, or how did that...?

MML: I found it on my own. I [08:00] was fortunate enough to – so, the Philadelphia school district was managed and run by a school board, a board of education. And they had opened up the board of education to have a student member. So, I was elected as the first student member of the board of education. [laughs].

MM: That’s awesome!

MML: Yeah, it was really cool. But I had like – I mean, it was an amazing experience, and again I credit that for being at Masterman and, like, you know kind of being connected to that world and... You know, I went to some of the board members and, you know, I said, “Listen. I’m looking at these places. You know, what kind of help can I, you know, get for it?” So, they started to expose me. Frankly, I was really looking at, you know, I was looking at Temple in Philly, because they’re – and my mother, like, my family was like, “Oh, yeah, go – you’ve got Penn here, you don’t have to leave.” Because people – even, like, really talented kids who had the chance to go to college – didn’t leave. Right? And frankly, nobody [09:00] in my neighborhood – there might have been like two girls who were college-bound, and they went to, like, local schools. So, you didn’t leave. That wasn’t a thing to do. So, for me, talking about even, like, going to Maryland was, like, this big deal. And so, but I was looking at, like, University of Richmond. Johns Hopkins was the big dog. And there were two kids at Masterman who were looking at Brown. I was like, “Well, what is this school?” And it was the number one kid, Allen Bushnell –

MM: [laughs]

MML: – and this other kid named Travell Perkins, and they were looking at Brown, and MIT, and all these other places. I had never considered going to school in New England, never considered an Ivy League school other than Penn. So, I said, “All right, let me check this place out.” And I, you know – My grandmother and I went up to A Day on College Hill. So, this was late; this was, like, April. I had actually gotten accepted. I applied and got accepted, but I had not visited before April. Because I knew I was going to Johns Hopkins [laughs] even with the miserable kids.

MM: So, you basically kind of, like, threw in an application [10:00] at Brown.

MML: Yeah, exactly.

MM: That’s funny. That’s awesome.

MML: I know, it’s crazy.

MM: So, you were already in, so then you come up on Day on the Hill.

MML: Yeah, I was already in. Went on Day on College Hill. My grandmother is from Birmingham, Alabama. Black woman from Birmingham, Alabama. Grew up in the ’30s, so you – I don’t have to give you a lot of background how, like, but you can imagine. She was dirt poor, only went to school up to eighth grade, experienced every kind of awful thing there was to experience as a black woman in Alabama in the ’30s, and ’40s, and ’50s, until she and my grandfather made their way north as part of The Great Migration, right? You know, we’re walking to campus. I said, “Well, what do you think, Grandma?” And my grandma is very straight-forward, she does not – she did not bite her tongue. She said, “Well, it’s nice, but there sure is a lot of white people.” [laughs] “Are you going to be OK here?”

MM: And this would have been in 1980 – you graduated in ’89?

MML: That would have been '90. It would have been '90. I mean, I'm sorry, [11:00] '94, '94.

MM: Ninety-four.

MML: Yeah, it would have been '94. Yep. So, spring of '94. And so, at one point, you know, we're walking around and then they have this big lunch. And I'm just sitting, and I see these young women, you know, serving, right? At, like, a lunch or something. And we strike up a conversation, and they tell me that they're Brown students. I think one was a sophomore, one was a junior. And the sophomore was Zuwati Powell and the junior was Poloum Adams because I – so – that's a great story. So, I strike up a conversation with them, and Zuwati says, "You need to come back another weekend. Like, you need to just spend some time, like, really staying at school. Not on an organized tour. Come back." And it was crazy, but, like, she invited me. I went up to my grandma, I was like, "I've got to come back, Grandma. Like, I need to come see another – see Brown in [12:00] a different way." So, you know, so I came, I went back. It might have been, like, just the very next weekend or two weekends later. I stayed with Zuwati in her dorm room in Perkins. I had the time of my life.

MM: Oh, I bet, yeah.

MML: Oh my gosh. There was so much happening that weekend. I think, like, I went to a play at Rites and Reason. And then I went to a party that night. I ended up dancing with – I didn't know at the time, but I learned who he was later – Elmo Terry-Morgan, professor, –

MM: Oh, yes. Oh my gosh.

MML: – Africana Studies. I had the most amazing time. So, after that, a week later I called Johns Hopkins, I withdrew my acceptance – because I actually accepted – but I withdrew it and then accepted at Brown. [laughs]

MM: Whoa.

MML: Didn't know how I was going to get there, right? Like, in terms of financial situation and, and then – mind you, my life was still in an uproar, [13:00] right? Like, I didn't have, like, a permanent place to live, my mom was still, like, in transition; she didn't have a permanent place to live. I was still, like, really emotional and raw from all the, you know, trauma that was – had happened in our household. All the physical abuse and everything. I got back to the board of education. I had my very last meeting and they had a, like, a nice little send-off. And then after the meeting, they were like, "Are you excited about going to college?" And I completely broke down. I completely broke down. Because I hadn't told anybody what was going on; it was like our big shame. And, so, I told them what was happening, and they were like, "Wow." Like, "We had no clue." And I said, "You know, I don't know how I'm going to actually get to Brown, I just accepted it –

MM: Whoa.

MML: – but I don't, like, we don't have any money. I don't, you know, I don't even have money for the deposit, I don't really know... You know, I filled out all the financial aid, I've done my own FAFSA. And then a package came through, but I was kind of [14:00] trying to analyze it, and my mother couldn't help, my grandmother couldn't help, I didn't really know what was going on."

MM: Yeah. It's like, that's tricky.

MML: Yeah. So, they really rallied around me. And one board member in particular – well, he wasn't a board member. He worked there, he worked at the school district. Charles Highsmith knew a gentleman who worked for the Annie E. Casey Foundation who was really close to Dr. Gregorian, who was our president. And then – So, they made some phone calls. Like, "We got this kid we love, and she has a really tough situation. And she got accepted, she's in, but she just doesn't know how she can pay for any of it [laughs] to make it happen." They did something and made something happen. I mean, I had a couple scholarships on my own. I had a Coca-Cola scholarship and some other money. But I didn't have, like, any cash on hand to be able to do

anything. So, they put together a collection at the school district. They bought me a computer. They paid for my \$500, [15:00] like, deposit.

MM: Wow.

MML: And then, working with Gregorian, they were just able to get – pay my student activities fee, get me situated. So, I mean. Brown was such a – just getting there was this amazing thing, and it was such a gift. And then, you know, I knew that when I got there, like, I had to make so many people proud; I had to pay back. I had all this positive debt, but I owed so many people so much: my mother, my grandmother, the family from the school district who really came together to support me through that tough time. And it was the best decision I had ever made. Zuwati, you know, who brought me on campus. Man, it was the best decision I had ever made, so...

MM: And this was also at a time – I mean, I think now there is more support. Not perfect, but more support for first-generation college students. And so –

MML: I love it.

MM: – at the time, it's like, that must have been really piecing it together. A little bit of –

MML: Yeah, I mean –

MM: – help here, [16:00] a little bit of help there, you know?

MML: Yeah. Even with the FAFSA process, like, I literally told – I said, “Mom, give me your tax returns.” And I did everything myself. I mean, she had so much going on, right? Like, she just couldn't help. She just help in that moment. So, you know, I did all my applications, I didn't have any SAT prep, I studied on my own.

MM: Oh my gosh.

MML: And it's funny, like, when I reflect on it – you know, and I was still a kid. Like, I was still trying to be a teenager. You know, but it was a tough time. I was trying to make sure she was in a good situation – frankly, trying to get her a divorce. Ended up paying for her divorce when I was in high school, I mean in college. You know, just trying to get her in a much better situation. So, I really love the efforts that have been made since to really work with and help first-generation students. Because you don't have that kind of family knowledge [17:00], that institutional knowledge. And you have to go in outside places for support and advice. And frankly the guidance – the funny thing is the guidance counselor at my college, at my high school, went to Brown. He was a Brown alum, but he wasn't helpful. Or supportive. And I think wasn't trying to – was actually trying to direct me away from Brown. And I still to this day don't know why. But, you know, he just wasn't there, and he wasn't supportive in that regard. So, I really felt like I just – I had to focus, and make it happen, and do it on my own. Yeah.

MM: So, let's talk about once you're at Brown. I always like to ask about highs and lows in your memory. If you have some flashpoints, some key moments. Start with whichever. And if you're willing to share something that was more challenging or something that sat with you not [18:00] in a great way, and if you're willing to share – let's do highs and lows.

MML: Yeah. So, the highs started, like, immediately. So, I went to the – what was then the Third World Transition Program, TWTP. Which was so amazing, and so really necessary because I – it was great to have this way of easing. Because it could have been a major culture shock coming to Brown, you know? I'm from Philly, I grew up in North Philly, which is a, you know, all-black neighborhood. You know, Philly like many other cities, is a very, very segregated city. Although, my school was very diverse at the time. Masterman was very diverse. And, you know, I was like super artsy. I was wearing, like, hand-painted T-shirts, and combat boots and dresses, and I had my hair really sho– in a really short afro and these little twists that were sticking up everywhere. Like I, you know. I looked like the fourth member of TLC.

MM: [laughs] Very '90s.

MML: Right. [laughs] Very '90s, [19:00] very '90s. You know, and I had my, like, I had a crew of similarly coifed [laughs] in aesthetic – you know, kind of folks who shared my aesthetic. And we were into spoken word poetry, and... You know, I used to hang out on South Street in Philadelphia with the Roots before they were signed, and –

MM: Whoa.

MML: – you know, Jill Scott. People were doing open mics and performances everywhere. So, I kind of came with that energy. So, in TWTP, every time – I was very vocal, so I stood up to talk, and I'd say, "I'm Markita from Philly." And I always said, "from Philly." Because there were so many New Yorkers around, so I always –

MM: Yeah, that's true.

MML: – had to make some – people knew me as "Markita from Philly." That was my name [laughs]

MM: Cute.

MML: And I met two of my best friends who've been my friends for, now, almost 25 years the very – at TWTP. Arhima Jacobs and Jessica Peña. [20:00] Because we were all like, you know, kind of looking for kids like us. Like, kids from, you know, tough neighborhoods in inner city who went to public, like, you know, higher-performing public schools. And Arhima went to Stuyvesant, she was from Crown [Heights?]. And Peña went to Brooklyn Tech. And I was like, OK, I done found, you know, these awesome folks, but they were – and they were New Yorkers, very different experiences, diverse backgrounds, like, it was just – it was very, very cool. So TWTP was awesome because it just – I was like, if this is Brown, I want to be more – I want more of this.

And then, fast-forwarding, you know – my – I spent a lot of time in Rites and Reason, so... When I met, for the second time, Elmo Terry-Morgan, I said, "Oh my gosh, I danced with

you at a party.” [laughter] He was like, “I remember you.” And I don’t know if he really remembered me to this day. But he said he remembered me. [21:00] And, like, Elmo –

MM: He’s a legend.

MML: – I love him. Oh my God, I’m about to cry because he is like – he’s a legend, but he was also like a father. He was, like, he is amazing. I saw him, you know, just a few weeks ago, a few weekends ago. And we both cried like babies. But, you know, he just – he opened me up to so much in terms of art, and theater, and connecting with our history. And he gave me, like, a language to articulate so many things I had felt and experienced. I think he was one of the first, like, adults outside of my family that I started to – I shared with, you know, kind of the, my background, and how I grew up, and what was going on. And he just made Brown home for me. Brown was absolutely home for me with – through him, and also, you know, the family he brought to campus. I don’t know if a lot of people know this, but he always brought actors and performers from his theater days [22:00] in his personal community in New York to Brown. And one he brought was a woman named Marsha who died of brain cancer some years ago, but we were extraordinarily close.

And Elmo would have these dinners at his home, and just bring this huge community together of just the most amazing people you can imagine. And he just created such a safe, welcoming space for students. But he also challenged us in class, right? Challenged our notions about everything. Like what we thought we knew about ourselves, our identity, our culture, our connection with art. He was – is – one of the highlights of my time at Brown. And, like, you know I always say I grew up in Philadelphia, but I was raised at Brown. I was raised in Philadelphia, but I grew up at Brown, that was the place where I came really into myself. Into a [23:00] strong sense of myself. So, he’s definitely one of the visceral highs at Brown. So, I spent a lot of time at Rites and Reason. I also had discovered Fusion, the dance company. We had a mini Fusion reunion at the Black Alumni Reunion event, too, because we got to meet one of the founders and that was, like, absolutely amazing.

MM: Cool.

MML: And so, Fusion, for me – I was not, like, a joiner, like – I was involved in a lot of different activities, but I didn't join a sorority, I didn't, like, you know, join groups. Fusion was that group for me.

MM: Can you tell our listeners a little bit more about Fusion, just to sort of –

MML: Yeah. Fusion's this – it's a dance company that was founded right on campus for students and by students. I don't know the exact year. I think it may have been, like, the late '80s when it was founded. And it was founded by two black women who just wanted an outlet [24:00] at the – on campus for dance for women. Or mostly women, initially, but folks of all backgrounds, all dance types, and all body types. That was really important. Because they felt at the time that the dance options at Brown were limited within the Dance department. That it was kind of, like, ballet and modern, and they were looking for folks who had a particular background and could move in a certain way. So, they really wanted, like, a multicultural space where they welcome folks with limited dance experience, and, you know, folks who'd been dancing since they were in the womb, to, you know, everybody in between. And there was an audition process, so it was this somewhat exclusive [laughs] kind of situation. But, I –

MM: Do you remember the – do you know the names of the founders, by any chance?

MML: Oh my gosh. I do. I have them written down, and I have her information in my phone. But I don't – I can't [25:00] think of her name right off of –

MM: If you can send it along, that would be cool –

MML: Oh, I will. I will.

MM: – to add into the transcript –

MML: Oh, absolutely.

MM: – because that’s a good piece of history for us to catch.

MML: Yes, yes. I’m writing it down now. And I can see her face, because we took a bunch of pictures together, too. [laughs]

MM: We also interviewed Nikki Strong over the –

MML: Oh, yeah. Yep.

MM: – and I’m wondering if she maybe participated in that, as well. She was very involved?

MML: Yes, she was one of the early – absolutely – she was one of the early founders. But, Fusion for me – Fusion was also a home. I had been a hip-hop dancer back home. I had discovered West African dancing right before I came to Brown, and kind of brought that with me to Fusion. So, I choreographed as well as performed. And, you know, again, life-long friendships. Aliah Greene is one of my kind of close friends – my 24, 25-year friends – who, you know, we kind of communicate regularly. And she was one of my Fusion buddies. And we even created this call. We would go, “Fu Fu, Sion” [26:00] and then [laughs] so any time, like, anybody from the ’9– I actually still think they do the call –

MM: [laughs]

MML: – because we talked to some youngsters. [laughs] So, we would be in the main green – on either side of the main green, you’d just scream, “Fu fu” and the other person would go, “Sion.” [laughter]

MM: Yeah, yeah.

MML: But Fusion was absolutely a wonderful highlight of my time at Brown. I mean, some of the challenges – my freshman year, there were, like, a spate of crazy, ridiculous, like, racist

incidents. There were, like, signs being posted on people's doors with pictures of monkeys, "go home," stuff like that. You know, and then –

MM: In your dorm? Did –

MML: No, I was in the quad. And my dorm and then some other dorms – and what I appreciate is, like, our, you know, kind of community came together really quickly to shut it down. You know, marching across campus, having forums, talking it through, trying to understand [27:00] the sources of things. And there were, you know, of course misunderstandings with folks through the years. People, frankly, who weren't used to seeing black people. I mean, that was a lot of that. And that surprised me. I encountered black people who didn't grow up with black people, which was – that was interesting for me. But also, a lot of white people had never really interacted with black people. They just didn't enter their sphere in any capacity. And then, so sometimes there were teaching moments, but then sometimes there was outright conflict. Reflecting so many years later, it's not really a – I don't really call it a low. It was a low at the time, granted, right? Because I was there to learn, and grow, and make friends, not to experience these sorts of things. So yeah, in that moment. But as I reflect with the, you know, with the aid of experience and time, again it just kind of contributed to, like, [28:00] the kind of work I do now and the kind of person I am now. You know, the kind of person I am who's willing to create a teachable moment out of a, you know, a difficult conversation. And again, what I appreciate about Brown is that the whole community came together really quickly to support those who'd been, like, direct victims of, you know, these targeted actions of hate. And to completely kind of dismiss them and deal with them head on.

But the ultimate highlight of my time at Brown is meeting my life partner, my husband Jacques Louis, class of '95.

MM: Oh, cool.

MML: Yeah. So, we didn't date while we were there. He graduated, he moved to France, and then my senior year – but we were cool, we were friendly. Because Jacques was, like, known as the guy – he's Haitian. He was known as "the Haitian sensation." He wore suits on campus and

carried a briefcase. [29:00] [laughter] Because he worked at Residence Life. You could not tell him he wasn't the dean of Residence Life because he got to hand out keys and help with – this guy, like, you know. So, everybody knew Jacques. Super friendly, just, like, you know, against – well-dressed, well-groomed. So, my freshman year, when he was a senior, you know, I was too much for him. He told me later, he was like, “Yeah...” He said, “I was pro-black, but you were pro-pro-pro-black.” [laughs] And he said, “I couldn't really get with your, you know, with your look either. You were a little too...” I was like, “A little too TLC?” He was like, “Yeah, a little too TLC.” [laughter] Little too ‘CrazySexyCool’ for him.

MM: What are you going to do? Yeah.

MML: Exactly. I was like, “You had to evolve to my look to –”

MM: Yeah, that's right.

MML: So my senior year – It's funny. My senior year, he came back and my look matured. And so, he was invited back to [30:00] speak at, like, some Caribbean students event that weekend. And I saw him speak, and then that night the Delta Sigma Theta sorority had a party. And my roommate, Sumayah, was the dean of the – or the vice president of the Delta. So, it was kind of her party, she was hosting. And I had been working all day, so I did not really want to go. I was like [sighs]. Pulled myself together and I went to the party. So, Jacques was there. And, like, he made a beeline to me. We talked for a little while. He was there with some of his – some of his classmates also came back that weekend. And we talked for a little bit, and I didn't really think anything of it. But I could tell he was checking me out. Because I was wearing these, like, shiny, slim green pants –

MM: [laughs]

MML: – you know, no longer wearing, like, super baggy jeans. You know, I had on heels, I wasn't doing the combat boots anymore. You know. I had kind of, you know, I had kind of become a lot more womanly. [31:00] So, I knew he was checking me out, but I didn't think

anything of it. So, I just went on about my business. The next night was an event called the Ebony Soirée at Andrews Hall. Like a party that the, I don't know who put that on. I think it was, like, the black student group at the time, the Organization of United African Peoples – that shows you how, like, Pan-African we thought we were – put on this event. It was just nice, you dressed up, you know. So, I was at the Ebony Soirée. I saw him there, too. He was like, “I tried to call you.” I said, “Well, I didn't get your call.” He was like, “I wanted to take you out.” Oh, did you? OK. I was like, “Well, I might be available tomorrow.” I was like, “Obviously I'm busy tonight, but [laughs] I might be available tomorrow.” So, the next day we had planned to meet for breakfast. He was going to pick me up from my apartment. And I lived in this awesome apartment with two other women, Angie Ramsey and Sumayah Taliaferro, my Fusion friend, above [32:00] the flower shop on Thayer Street, across from the CVS. It's like a cool sneaker store now.

MM: Yes, yes. That's right here. That's right behind our building, yeah.

MML: Oh, wow, yeah. But we loved that apartment. Everybody hung out there. It was a three-bedroom apartment, it was really dope, and it had been right on Thayer Street.

MM: Fun.

MML: Amazing, yeah. So, I had, like, three good friends coming over helping me figure out what to wear, because it's Jacques Louis, like, the Haitian sensation. He's always dressed to the nines and –

MM: [laughs]

MML: – you know, I had to look good. So, Jacques comes over. He comes over the next morning. He's wearing, like, this ratty sweater, and he's –

MM: Where's the suit?

MML: Yeah, I'm like, "What the hell is going on?" [laughter] He said, "Well, I actually hadn't planned to stay the weekend." He said, "I saw you, and I stayed – I actually stayed." Like, he stayed with his friend Dan, who was in Boston. So he was like, "I really didn't have any clothes, any good clothes, you know, but I pulled together what I could." So, we spent the entire day together. We just literally [33:00] walked around campus. I don't even know if we ate. It was from, like, 11 a.m. to – I had Fusion rehearsal that night, so maybe until, like, 6:00, 6:30. He walked me to Fusion. We were there for hours together, walking, and talking, and just having an amazing time. And before he left to go to New York, he gave me, like, his cell ph– well, did we? Yeah, he had a cell phone [laughter] number. His work number, his home num– he gave me every single way to contact him. [laughs] And I'd said, "Call me when you get home and let me know you arrived safely." So, he called me that night, and I think we talked until 4:00 a.m.

MM: Wow.

MML: You know, and back then, you know, long-distance call, it was really expensive. So, we racked up a ton of phone calls. I think that first date, it was – and it was cold, it was like Febr– it was February 22<sup>nd</sup>. That was our first date, 1998, and we've been together ever since.

MM: No way.

MML: Yep. Yep.

MM: I love that story.

MML: Yeah. [34:00] [laughs]

MM: That is a high. That is a super high.

MML: It's super, super high. So, we have two kids who'll be – who are 12 and 13, and... And the funniest thing for us is, like, there are still people who are just finding out that we've been

married for 16 years and together for 20 years. Like, it cracks me up. Like, people are like, “How did that happen?” [laughs]

MM: Like, at BAR weekend were people (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) –

MML: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, it’s like ridiculous.

MM: Wow.

MML: So, that’s the ultimate high that can eclipse – you know. [laughs]

MM: Yeah. I love that. I love recording the history of love. That’s great.

MML: That’s awesome. That is awesome.

MM: So, we’re kind of closing in a little bit on time, but I want to talk about what you do now. I want to hear what – the legacy of Brown University in your life, and how you put it to use if you did, your education. Please share some about that.

MML: Absolutely. So, I was a African American Studies and Anthropology major. [35:00] I mean, frankly, Brown had opened up this world to me, because when I got there I was like, “Oh, I’m going to be a cardiologist or a biochemist.” I knew I was going to be destined for the sciences. But then people kept saying things to me like, “Oh, but you’re so good in the arts. But you’re so good in this. Like, oh, you’re good at public speaking. You can do this...” And I had started taking all these different kinds of classes, and for some people that would be really freeing, but for me – it was freeing, but it was also kind of – it created a lot of confusion in me about what I should do with my life, right? So, I’m the smart girl from this family that doesn’t have a lot of resources, so I’m supposed to be a doctor. [laughs] Like, I’m supposed to be a doctor. But I was like, “That’s not for me.” I wasn’t sure what –

MM: Oh, wow.

MML: – I was supposed to do. So, when I graduated, I kind of –

MM: Did that cause – I'm so– did that cause some growing pains for you when you [figured that?] –

MML: Big time. Big time.

MM: – because it sounds like, yeah.

MML: I felt like I was a Jill of all trades, master of none. Like, I had got – had all these really cool experiences while I was [36:00] at Brown. Like I said, like at theater. I went to South Africa for a semester, and had an absolutely amazing time there.

MM: Oh, wow.

MML: I worked in a hair salon [laughs] while I was in South Africa. Like, what I didn't mention is I – you know, my friend Arhima and I both knew how to braid hair and do natural hair. And so, you know, we made money, you know, helping ourselves, like, around – we also worked – but we also made money and supported ourselves by doing hair. Because there weren't a lot of places for black women in Providence at that time to get their hair done. So, we did hair on campus. Like, had our own little mini salon. So, when I went to South Africa, I had a book of hairstyles I had done at Brown and was able to get a job at a hair salon in Durban, South Africa –

MM: Whoa.

MML: – because of Brown. Yeah. I should have mentioned it, because of Brown.

MM: Wow.

MML: So, I worked at Ashanti Hair Salon in downtown Durban. It was amazing. And it was a great way to not be a tourist, right?

MM: Yeah.

MML: Like, I'm working in an industry that's, like, very important to black people. [laughs] [37:00] And I got to meet, like, the hottest music artists because the salon was, like, a place where, like, fancy famous people were getting their hair done. I got to go backstage at concerts. I learned a lot of Zulu, like I [laughs]...

MM: That is amazing.

MML: I had an amazing time. Yeah. [Honestly?] amazing time. And I did some really good research while I was there, too, but that [laughs], it was really –

MM: You did life research, it sounds like.

MML: [laughs] Life research. So, but what Brown opened up to me – opened up for me – was like this commitment to social justice. This connection to community. I always wanted to be of service. So, really, more a life of public service. Even if I didn't have a specific destination around it, I just knew that I had to be doing something where I felt I was doing good work, and I felt good about the work. (inaudible)

But, I was like that aimless college graduate. I had applied for a Fulbright to return to South Africa. I didn't get it. I'm actually glad I didn't get it [38:00] because I had this new relationship –

MM: Yeah, that would've been hard.

MML: – that probab– that may not have lasted with me being overseas for two years. A year or two. Now I'm glad I didn't get it, but it put – when, at the time, I was devastated. Put me in a tailspin, like, “What am I going to do with my life?”

MM: I bet.

MML: I ended up getting a job in D.C. with the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights. And I was doing a lot of work in fair employment, fair housing. And I said, "OK, this is pretty cool. And I'm going to go to law school. Not going to do this kind of work, not impact litigation." But I started learning more about community development; I was like, "That's what I want to do." I want to support neighborhood development because I had grown up in low-income housing, and, you know, my experience with domestic violence. Because I need to be able to serve in that space and that work. I left D.C., I went to law school in New York. And while I was in New York, I was doing a lot of work in, like, economic justice and community development work.

MM: Did you go to NYU?

MML: NYU. I went to NYU for [39:00] law school. It's funny, there were like a handful of Brown-NYU people who went to Brown undergrad and Brown law – and NYU law school. And that makes sense. NYU seemed to be, like, a little bit, like, the earthiest – and it's earthy for law school, you know what I mean

– but a little bit of the earthiest of the so-called higher-tier law schools, so it made sense. And then I went to work for a legal services organization doing transactions. Working with community development corporations, helping them build affordable housing.

Being home in Philly was a little bit tough. I wanted to go back home, I wanted to, like, bring all these resources and my experiences back home. But it was a little tough returning, trying to kind of regain my figurative accent, right? Like, what does it mean to be back home again? And I'm this different person. I'm in this different, like, social-economic space from my family. I've had all these experiences that I've had personally, and I've tried to share with them as best I could [40:00], but they couldn't relate to them. So, I came back a very different person than the person I left as.

MM: Were you kind of hit in the face by that, like, when –

MML: Yeah.

MM: – you got home, were you not ex– I mean, why would you –

MML: I was accepted, but there were a lot of, like, there was also this kind of, I think, distance – my family just creating a little bit – because they weren't sure how to receive me, right? So, I spoke a little differently. Like, I'd lost some of my Philly accent. You know. And –

MM: Was it a surprise, though? Was the distance between you and your family – what you were feeling – was that a surprise when that happened?

MML: Not for me, because I was always a little bit odd. Like, I was always a little bit different from folks in my family, right? Like, I like things – you know, even as a kid, like, I wanted to go to museums and I ate vegetables. Like –

MM: [laughs]

MML: – who does that? Like, I was always a little bit of an oddball in the family. But I think it was much more pronounced now from – and we've bridged it. But I know, like, with my [41:00] siblings there was some distance, and some of my cousins, and... You know, trying to reconnect with them was harder because we just, we weren't into the same things. Like, if I wanted to talk world affairs or, like I said, go to museums, they wanted to go to the club. And that's cool, but we weren't going to the same spaces. Like, I was just into different things, right? And I would try to bridge the gap and join their world, but very infrequently would they join my world. And I had to adapt to that. And that was fine. Like, it was fine for a long time. I just adapted. Like I said, coming back had its challenges. My brother had had a son while I was in my senior year. He had a kid when he was 16.

MM: Wow.

MML: Trying to be really involved in his son's life. And then he had another child when I got back a couple, three years later. So, trying to really be supportive, you know, of them. And also trying to help my mom financially, [42:00] as well. So, you know, there was a lot going on. So, I ended up going to a large law firm, you know, to help – just to help. To help financially. And it was a good chunk of my life. I learned a lot about work ethic, got a lot of experience, and then got a little bit of credentialing, but – that would help me kind of, that would help me later on – but it was a very tough experience.

MM: Yeah. Because those are brutal. It'd be like long, long hours, right?

MML: Long hours. A place that, you know, I've had some interesting experiences and conversations being a black woman in a large law firm. That's a whole different story. [laughter] Whole different conversation, Mary. But I left there, I went back into public interest. I was Senior Vice President General Counsel of a housing and financial counseling organization, so I was back connected with, like, community development housing work. Loved that work. [43:00] It's broadened my network. I did some really, really cool things connecting financial capability – which is like financial literacy – supporting low-income families and communities, and accessing safe, decent, sound financial services and products. I did a lot of, like, consumer advocacy work –

MM: I saw that online. I think that's incredible.

MML: Yeah. I absolutely loved it. Absolutely loved it and did that for five and a half years. And then an opportunity came up for me to kind of go back to the work that I love in the arts. You know, deeper connection professionally with the arts community, but also leveraging all of my kind of relationships, experiences, in housing and economic development, community development. So now – well, actually, in two weeks. [laughs] I'm in between jobs right now. Last day at my prior organization was Friday and I start my new gig in a couple weeks, just [44:00] –

MM: And what's –

MML: – taking a little bit of a breather.

MM: Yeah. And what's that going to be?

MML: I'm going to be Executive Director of the Arts & Business Council of Greater Philadelphia. So, it's helping –

MM: Oh, cool.

MM: Yeah. It's really helping create – not just the arts, but kind of the creative space in Philadelphia with capacity building so they can build jobs and stimulate a creative economy. Show how the creative economy is just as energizing and forward-moving and thinking as eds and meds; you know, educational institutions and kind of the – and the pharma/health industry, which is really big in Philadelphia. So, I'm really excited to –

MM: Wow.

MML: – take on that role and to, you know, just work in a different space. It connects the dots of all these different experiences I've had in my life, like community development, my economic development, and my performing, you know, work.

MM: Yes, yes. Wow, that is perfect.

MML: It is. It really is. [laughs]

MM: Yeah, yeah. That's funny how that [45:00] works out. That's great.

MML: Yeah. Life is good, life is good.

MM: Yeah. Yeah. Well, so we're coming up a little bit on time here for the interview – and I apologize, your video has frozen, so if I'm making funny faces at you, that's why.

MML: No, no, that's all right. And I can see you perfectly, so –

MM: OK, great. But I can hear you great, so that's... So, I think what I'll ask now is, please, if you have anything else to share that you want to make sure that is recorded, now would be the time. If there's something else sitting in your mind that you want to make sure to get down on the record, let's do that now.

MML: Yeah, no. So I've had – Brown has given to me so many gifts. My family [laughs] is one of them. You know, my amazing husband and my wonderful boys, but also these just, like, deep and lasting friendships. On my phone I have, like, you know, different groups of women that I talk to. [46:00] I've always been blessed with, like, the best friendships. And closest with women, and I cherish it. And my crew, my Br– we refer to ourselves as our Brown crew – and the beautiful thing is we span years. So, there's Arhima and Jessica from '98. There's [Hodrick?], Dr. Hodrick [Grave?] from '97. There's Aliah Greene from '96, and then there's Robyn Neblett Fanfair from '99.

And our friendships – yeah, of course they started at Brown, but they blossomed beyond. But we always, like, maintain this connection. And the five or six of us got together for Black Alumni Reunion weekend. And we've just maintained this friendship through births, and deaths, and tragedy, and success, and everything else over the last, you know, 20 plus years. It's been absolutely amazing. And then we have extended friendships, you know, beyond that, but this is kind of like my Brown crew [47:00] core. And I will be forever indebted to the University for giving me this life. For giving me, you know, the opportunities I've had, and for just being so loving and supportive. You know, I don't have that same kind of feeling to my graduate experience, but Brown I absolutely love and will do anything for.

MM: That's really lovely. Please, when you speak with your friends, encourage them –

MML: [laughs]

MM: – to contact me, and to –

MML: I will.

MM: – also share their story.

MML: I will.

MM: I would love to include them. So, I will conclude by just saying thank you so much for taking the time today to sit with me and donate an oral history interview to Brown Women Speak. We have, I think, just over 230 interviews that are part of the –

MML: Wow.

MM: – archive, which started in 1986. So –

MML: Really?

MM: – these go [48:00] way, way back. The first woman who recorded an interview graduated in the class of, like, 1911.

MML: Oh, wow.

MM: If you can believe it. So, you've become – your interview becomes added to this corpus of data that will be used by people all over the country, and probably all over the world. So, that's really cool.

MML: Oh, that's [significant?].

MM: So, I'm going to turn off the recording now, and then you and I can just wrap up.

MML: Thank you, Mary.

MM: OK, hang on just one –

- END -