

Linda Kennedy, Class of 1972 and Ben Cox, Class of 1972

Conversation 3/28/2018

Linda Kennedy (LK): So, How did you hear about Macalester?

Ben Cox (BC): I was at breakfast one morning with one Professor Bateman and his wife and their daughter. And I came in that morning to announce that I had just been accepted to the U of M. And I was really excited. He looked up from his food and looked back down with some disdain and said, "What's wrong? You afraid to go to a really good school like our son Ned [Ned Bateman, Class of 1971]?" Ned was at, currently at Macalester. So, I trotted right off, and went up to Macalester, and applied. Initially I got rejected, and then I went back. And I was fortunate and I met with the president of the school. We talked for about 15-20 minutes. I went back to Rochester. And I got a letter in the mail that says, "Proud to let you know you've been accepted to Mac." And that's how I went to Macalester.

LK: So you, but you were in school somewhere else, right?

BC: I was in school in Rochester, Minnesota. At that time it was called RSJC, Rochester Community...it was a junior college in Rochester, Minnesota.

LK: Oh, OK. So when you got there, what were your first impressions?

BC: It was a small campus in the middle of town. Compared with the behemoth of the U of M. And what was striking to me is, the girl I was dating at the time, she was attending the University of Minnesota, over in Minneapolis. And she had 250 people in her section, which was one of many sections for the course she was taking. And there were about 250 people in the class. They had monitors, television monitors along the wall. You never—she never met with the professor, she always met with a teaching assistant. And that right there made me extremely happy to be at Mac. I had my Classics class, there were only 6 people in the class. Myself, a set of twins, and three other people, with Dr. Edward Brooks. And then my history classes. I mean, maybe there were 20, 25 people in a class. And then I was fortunate—I had a, I had a tutor—Chester Hedgepeth. Uh...plus our—my living surroundings were really nice. I lived in Dupre Hall. The tiny room was just a hop skip a jump across the pavement. Classrooms weren't too far away. Even though I had a car, I didn't have to drive anywhere. Other than when I was going to the University of Minnesota to use their library for my classics work. Uh...that's about that.

LK: OK, so you had good first impressions.

BC: Yes.

LK: OK. So, um...what about the EEO program? What did you, what'd you hear about that?

BC: Well, I wasn't an EEO student. And from what I had gleaned at first when I first came, I was told about the EEO program but I wasn't part of it because I was a transfer student. And I think EEO was designed for four-year students. I had a scholarship from a group of ministers, an insurance company that was run by ministers—at least, that's what I was told. So I had a work study obligation that caused me to be a messenger out of the EEO office. But I had really no contact with the EEO program.

LK: Do you remember any of the staff?

BC: Oh, Jim Bennett [Class of 1969], Marie Braddock [sp?], and some guy, called himself Colin Tuwext [sp?].

LK: Do you remember Chinula C. Chinula?

BC: Yeah, I remember Chinula. Uh, he was from Kenya.

LK: I think so.

BC: Yes.

LK: OK. So, um, what about EEO students? Did you interact with them?

BC: Well, I knew the people that lived across the hall from me. Larry Alexander [Class of 1973], and John Jordan [Class of 1976]. And then there was a guy I think, Larry Richardson, that lived next door to me. Uh... there were a couple other students that I remember meeting. But I really don't remember any of them being in classes that I was taking.

LK: Well, and then, you were— you would have been older, because they were all freshmen. And so, th— you would have been in, in um, higher level—they would have been in intro classes and you would have been not in intro classes, probably.

BC: Well, I think not because some of them were graduated in '73. So that meant they had to already have been there at least two years. And I think a lot of them—I think there was a guy named Clem [Clem Crowe,

Class of 1973], uh Russ Flewellen [Russ Flewellen, II, Class of 1972]. All of them had already been there for a couple years. At least the ones that I...had occasion to meet.

LK: They all came in in '69. And graduated in '73.

BC: Yes, that's what I'm saying. They were already there when I arrived.

LK: Right, they—but you all came in in—at the same year, I think.

BC: No, it's not possible. And they came in '69, I started in Rochester at that time. And I came to Macalester—

LK: Oh!

BC: —in '70.

LK: Oh, you did? OK, I had you there in '69, OK.

BC: Nope, I came to Macalester in '70. I spent that year there and I was—

LK: So they were sophomores, and you were a junior.

BC: Excuse me?

LK: They were sophomores, and you were a junior.

BC: Yes.

LK: I see, OK. So—

BC: So, you know the time that I had there with them and, I think, in your and my talks from before, I was going past International Center one day and I dropped in and I met with Rich Satterthwaite. And I ask him what are the opportunities for studying abroad. He said well, you know—would you like to go study in England, or would you like to go study in Africa. At that time I was young, impressionable, I said, "What about Africa?" He said, "Let me check and I'll get back to you." So, maybe the next week he came back and he said they found a spot for me at the University of Dar es Salaam, but he didn't really like that because the school year started in December. But they had found another spot for me in Nigeria at the University of Ife, which was tied to the

University of London. And, there was a Mac alum who was the Dean of Admissions at the University of Lagos, and he would be meeting me at the airport. So, I was preparing to go to Nigeria and I received a call from Satterthwaite saying, "Ben, we have a charter flight going to Paris. And we would like you to be on that flight. You go spend a little bit of time in Paris, make your way to London, and then make your way down to Nigeria." Which, which I did. I won't go into details about my short stay in Paris and my stay in London, but they were both rewarding. I got Nigerian Airways, and the plane—it was interesting. The plane was full of black people, being flown by black people. The back of the plane was full of Chinese people—Chinese businessmen. Which back then, they were making inroads, were preparing to go into Nigeria, because Nigeria is a big oil-producing country. When I got there, the uh, the gentleman from—the Mac alum from the University of Lagos picked me up. Stayed at his house for two days. Then I moved on to Ibadan. Which was a major city back at that time. I stayed with his cousin there, I think for two days. And then I started on to Ife. But interestingly, on the way there I saw Greyhound Nigeria. Being pushed by people. A whole Greyhound bus being pushed by people. I get to Ife and take a taxi—ah, I mean, It was eventful. I take a taxi, we get almost on the campus and the taxi runs out of gas. The guy tells me, "Wait here, I'm gonna go get gas." And I must have sat there in the taxi—me, by myself, waiting for him to come back. And then the gate to the campus was only like, maybe 10 minutes away. But once you got to the gate, it seemed like you drove forever to get inside the campus. Now, I stayed in a place called Fajuyi Hall. Which named—was named after General Fajuyi. Well, that was interesting. Everybody you met addressed you by your surname until you told them, "You can call me Ben." My roommate was ten years older than me. My neighbors on the floor where I stayed, some were 20 years older than me. Some even more than that. And I mean there were people there who were like 45, 47 years old, running track and playing basketball. And I said, "No, nobody will believe this." There were women opening coca-cola bottles with their teeth and I said, "Aw, nobody will believe this." These were the light-hearted things. But when we started going to class, the people were serious about what you call, "book." Serious. A gentleman would tell you, "I'm majoring in computers." Another gentleman would tell you, "I'm majoring in mathematics." Another one would tell you, "I'm majoring in chemistry." And, you know, that was something different than being at Macalester. It seemed like everybody was majoring in sociology. And all these guys were doing hard science and mathematics. We would go to class, well, I played—there was a guy there from, um, the school out in California—Stanford. Douglas Head was there and he was coaching the basketball team. He came to me asked me to become part of the team, that I could help him do his job. So we used to get up at 5:30 and go to basketball practice. From that, come back and have breakfast and then go to class. You got out of class, you came home, you took a nap. And you got ready for dinner. And if you missed dinner, you didn't get to eat. So you didn't miss a dinner. Then we would go back and study, say from around 6:30, 7 o'clock. Study up to 1, 2, 3 o'clock in the morning. And I was fortunate again. I met a guy, Tannie Stovall, Professor Tannie Stovall. He had a PhD in nuclear physics from the University of Minnesota. We met and for some reason, he said, "Ben here, here's the key to my office. You can use my office to study." Which meant I had the benefit of air conditioning. And I'd never miss class. I'd never miss class. I didn't get sick. I went to class because it was

interesting. I did 14—15th and 16th-century political and economic history of what is now Nigeria. Dealing with the slave trade. Internal and external slavery. Some of my classmates, the ones who were from there, had to go out to the villages and interview elderly people. But there was a gentleman there who taught the class—Professor [Okenjoben sp?]. When he came to class, the first day he came—little short gentleman—he came in and then he said, “All of you are stupid. All of you are ignorant. But, you have the capacity to learn, if you want to learn.” He said, “I speak English. I speak Spanish. I speak Portuguese. I speak Dutch. I speak Yoruba. I know all the languages I need to know to do my work.” And we got started. From the inception of the Yoruba people coming from Northeastern Nigeria. And, this was in the 7th century. And they were on the run from the Mohammedans at that time. But they came down and they destroyed—they had a policy of not leaving anything standing in their way. Unlike the Muslims who came, they said they would not turn and face their enemy. And I took two courses under, one Dr. [Ramahay Doy sp?]. And one was the history of Islam. And the other one was Islam in Africa. And I took a course in African and continental literature, uh—taught by Ulli, not Ulli Beier, taught by [Emecheta sp?]. He was a novelist and a critic. And I had a chance to meet um, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. And at that time I think I had read all—by the time I finished that school year I had read all of the African Writers Series. I met a gentleman who was there teaching philosophy from South Africa, who subsequently became the Minister of Education for the ANC. And during our talks he volunteered that he could get me into South Africa. I told him, “I don’t think so. You getting me in is one thing. Me getting out alive would be something else.” Because that was before the end of Apartheid. And I didn’t think that those gentlemen—Ian Smith and the rest of them who were down in that area—would be very happy to find me scooting around in there. But he offered to take me in, underground, into South Africa. Well, I told him, “Nope, can’t do.” So I stayed there, and one of my projects for Dr. [Okenjoben sp?] was to write a paper and tell him what I had learned in his class. Before going to Nigeria I met with my grandmother. She was on her deathbed, she had cancer. And she told me, “come close.” And she grabbed my wrist and pulled me close to her. And she said, “Don’t forget what they did to us.” What education we did get on this side about slavery, we only saw the American side of slavery. White persons trading in black slaves. When I was in Nigeria, it was black people trading in black people. With all of—with all of this going on I had the opportunity to travel by road from Lagos to Takoradi which is Ghana, and up into Ghana, into Accra, Cape Coast, other place I stopped was Elmina, Ouidah. And constantly listening, looking, and learning. And Elmina and Cape Coast, the cannons and the guns—they weren’t pointed in, to shoot the Africans. They were pointed at each other, to shoot each other. One course I didn’t mention, I took a course in the Nigerian legal system. And Cape Coast—the British and the other European nations had what’s called maritime courts to settle disputes between the European nations that were dealing in the slave trade. Going back to the course from Dr [Okenjoben sp?], I learned that on all of those vessels, the Portuguese vessels, and the Spanish vessels that sailed, all had one of the Pope’s representatives on board to take up or collect the taxes for what was due to the Pope. And to put it in perspective, the Portuguese and the Spanish and the Dutch were there long before the British, uh, and the French. There were no establishments there to represent the Americans—none whatsoever. But it was

interesting to learn what was going on over there at the time in terms of the slave trade. And...by the time the slave trade had ended here, the Yoruba had essentially ran out of people to trade. The people that they met when they went there is who they were selling into slavery. So by the time slavery ended here, in the 1800s, they were selling each other. And occasionally you would run into a Nigerian or a Yoruba, and he would have these deep cuts or marks in his face. And that's to distinguish—so that they wouldn't be selling their own people. So, again, you—you study and you learn and you travel around [the] people and you learn. I moved north—after school was out I moved north to Kano. Which is the Muslim area of the country. But before going there and playing basketball I had played in all-Nigerian University games. And the games that year were played at Ahmadu Bello University, it was in Kaduna, where the university is located. So, it was familiar to me. I went there with somebody that I had met. A black American was there, who had gone there. When the space program first started he told me that he had been stationed up in that area. And he and his family invited me to come live with them after I left school, with the idea that I would be able to go in business for myself or go in business with him and his family. So I stayed there maybe five or six months. Graduation was taking place at Macalester but I said, boy-oh-boy, I'm learning a whole lot here, so I'm staying. The graduation will go on without me. But there's a whole lot of footnotes in there that I'm not talking about. But I enjoyed—I enjoyed myself—thoroughly. I think I learned a whole lot from school and about myself there.

LK: Well when you were on—

BC: It was an interesting experience...

LK: So, what was the—what was the dialog—what was the situation around race on campus, in your opinion?

BC: You know, at this time—at this time on Mac campus, with all these questions you were asking me, I would be asking you if you worked for J. Edgar Hoover, or COINTELPRO, or some of those things that we were monitoring at times—3M, was it 3M?—and Control Data, the Vietnam War was going on at that time. Richard Nixon was President at that time. Uh, I had a—white female companion at that time. The EEO students that looked—that were there on the campus, the ones that were living in my dorm, they walked around with their mouth puffed up, but at that time I think I was in pretty good shape so then nobody say anything to me. They didn't say anything, unless they wanted to come and get a haircut. It was none of that nonsense. You come talk to me. If you remember, that's when Stokely Carmichael came to visit the campus. That's when [Wayzel Flewellen sp?] was running the self-defense class, and I always wondered whether he took me as his sparring partner because of my girlfriend at that time, but it was a learning experience for me because, I was in pretty good shape and I learned how to fight—street fight. Uh, again that probably contributed—gave me a whole lot of confidence before I left to go to Nigeria.

LK: What was the—what was the prevailing conversation though, around race, that you heard when you were at school?

BC: Well, I think Linda, I was there for school. When I was doing the classics classes—I had classics, I had literature, I had Jim Stewart—or, I had Jim Fisher [sic Stewart] for history class. I had Jim Stewart [sic Jerry Fisher] for East Asian Studies. I had my literature class. I had a lot, a lot, of reading and writing to do. I didn't have time to hang out in front of the fireplace with anybody. If anything, if you recall, there was a guy there, a character named Marlon Jackson. Marlon Jackson and I had become friends. If I wasn't studying, then we were some place over there in that little town, next to campus having a pizza and throwing back a couple beers. But I didn't really go to that place—wherever it was—the mailboxes were, I didn't go sit down there. I didn't have time to waste. Plus, I had a job at an elementary school as a teacher's aide. That, along with being a messenger for EEO, I didn't really have a lot of time. I didn't play basketball. I didn't play football. Even though they came and tried to convince me to, I didn't feel that I was there for that. I was there to study. And that's what I did.

LK: Was there any intersection between race and say, opposition to the Vietnam War?

BC: No. Not that I—not that I'm aware of. See Linda, what I was into, when I took um...Stewart's class, I put on a play at the Weyerhaeuser Chapel. The fall of one city—I can't remember the play that I put on. It was about the fall of one city in Vietnam, when the Americans came and liberated...the Vietnamese. My interaction...was with my classmates. If you were in my class, it didn't matter to me whether you were black or white. We interacted. There was a guy, Phillip Durham—Phil Durham. Uh, in our little chats that we had he told me he was leaving school. I don't know if he was disillusioned with Mac or what, but that he was going to go work on a ranch for some time. I've—in the last 45 years I've spoken with him once on the phone. And I didn't really get much information out of him, but I—he had told me he was leaving Macalester. I really don't remember names, I remember faces.

LK: OK. I think that's just about all I have. Except, you know—you were saying that when you were in—when you were in Nigeria, students who were majoring in mathematics and the sciences, and at Macalester, everybody was majoring in social sciences. Do you think, as I do, that part of that was...some of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society—uh, give back to your people kind of thing? We were not encouraged, and as I remember on campus, nobody was really interested in the corporate world. We were all—

BC: Well, it's not—it's not a matter of being interested in the corporate world. As you said, the Great Society Movement—Lyndon Johnson's movement. But something that you have to realize—I grew up here on the East Coast in a blue collar town. When I went to see my counselor, advisor, and then she asked me—she said,

“Benjamin, what do you want to be when you come out of school?” I said, “a lawyer, a fighter pilot, or an engineer.” And she calmly looked at me and told me, “Negroes don’t do that. They go work in the steel mill, or they go into the army.” You still had that particular mindset, at least from where I was coming from. So of course it was very interesting to see...not one or two, but a whole class. But I mean, you know, the whole section, or the department, of the university was—looked like us! And they weren’t—they didn’t feel like they were being challenged. Some people had started school when they were fifteen years old—in the first grade. And I had occasion to ask a doctor here that. “How come it’s possible to go to Africa or some of these places, and you’re able to get people out of there and bring them here, and they can excel in school?” But I—as I said, you look, and you learn, and you listen. I used to visit some of the small towns, and when you would go there in the nighttime, you would see night school going on. Small children would be sitting on the back porch, or the piazza. A tutor would be there with a blackboard teaching mathematics and science. And I think today, that’s why when you see, the Nigerians seem so impressive when you meet them here, at least the ones that you meet here, they had different foundations than what were provided to some of us. Now, I have—I grew up in a family where my mom was a nurse. My dad was a truck driver. But I have a lot, a lot, a lot of cousins. And I mean they’re everywhere. Harvard, Yale, West Point...the FBI. It was in 19—I think about 1970, when the major schools opened their doors, like Macalester did with EEOC, when they brought all those students in. If you were to take a survey of the U of M or other, any other big schools, that’s when they opened their doors. The initial opening of those doors were for athletes. They brought—they brought in athletes. They were looking for star athletes for their teams. Then they started figuring out, “Oh, these guys and girls can do something else.” Cause I told you my friend graduated from Morehouse when he was like, 16 or 17. He went to the University of Minnesota—got a PhD in nuclear physics. His name is Tannie Stovall. T-A-N-N-I-E S-T-O-V-A-L-L. And he told me, he said, “Ben, when I was graduating from the University of Minnesota, they told me, ‘you’re getting this degree but you’re not gonna get to use it.’” So I said, “Yeah?” He said, “So,” He decided to leave. He went because the French were just starting their nuclear industry. And the French hired him right away. So, he went there—he and his wife. His wife worked for UNESCO, he worked for the French government. The French nuclear industry. And, he ended up coming to Nigeria to teach nuclear physics—or to teach physics. He said he had put together a group of people from Switzerland and some other countries that wanted to buy a teaching reactor. A nuclear reactor to put on the University of Ife campus. But it fell through because of the actions—or the actions of one person there at Ife. That this thing was blocked by the UN to keep them from getting a reactor down there at that time. I had professors that had gone to the University of Moscow. Not Lumumba University, but the University of Moscow. This gentleman had two PhDs. One from the University of Moscow, and I’m not sure if the other one was from Cambridge, Oxford, or King’s College in...in London. Something you haven’t, you haven’t answered—asked me Linda, I consider myself to have been extremely fortunate. And I consider Macalester to be part and parcel of that. So whenever I have an opportunity, I always talk up Macalester. That it’s—it’s a hidden value, that people here on the East Coast—there are not a lot of people know about. I tried to convince my daughter to come here—to go to

Macalester. Because I knew, I knew the opportunity that it would present to her. I knew, or I felt, that the opportunity that she would gain by going to Macalester, or a school like Macalester. I'm happy—she's finished—she's finished college. But I think that she would have had an opportunity to go much further had she come to Macalester. At present, I'm an attorney. I'm semi-retired, but I've been a school teacher, I've been a banker, I've taught in a university, I hold a Master's Degree in Comparative International Law, and I still work and support myself. And I think Macalester helped lay the foundation for that. And in our—in our old, in our older age, we still want to be useful. We want to be useful to ourselves, and we want to be useful to society. And I think that was one of the things that Macalester instilled in you. You should be useful to society—give something back, to society. You and I have chatted about this a number of times. I didn't feel that Macalester said, "This is what you're supposed to think. This is what you're supposed to think." Macalester said, "Look, you've got something up there, use it. Learn how to use it. Learn how to think for yourself. Learn how to think for yourself." And that's what Macalester does. When I visited the campus, oh, a couple years back—I saw a lot of people of color there. But I didn't see people of color from the US. Not that anybody was wearing around a sign that says, "oh, I'm from Brooklyn," or "I'm from Chicago," or "I'm from D.C.," like the people were doing when I was there on the campus. "Oh, I'm from Chicago. I'm from D.C.," or the people said, "I'm from here—I'm from the Twin Cities." You don't—there's an absence. And I was wondering out loud why there was an absence—is it because Macalester is not looking for students again, or because the students aren't looking at Macalester. And the question is—should be, why? Why? I have a cousin a generation down from me. He went to Harvard. I just had another—a niece graduate—graduate work from Purdue. I have another niece who went to Rutgers, and to Penn State. These people could make it at Macalester. They could make it—they not only would make it, they would do well there at Macalester. You know, we talk about people who are...engineers that have come out of Macalester, or are doctors—one or two, spotty. But there should be a lot more. And without—at this stage, without anybody having to bend over backwards to say, "Oh, we need these students and we gotta tutor them in order for them to make it,"—that's crap. When I came there it made me a little nervous when I first came because they were talking about the number of Merit Scholars that were there. Now, I don't know if that was to intimidate other people or not. But I was determined—when I got there, "I'm gonna finish this journey." And I had uh, I had a meeting with the current President of Macalester. And I had occasion to tell him, I said "I graduated from here in one year." He said, "How is that possible?" I said, "I graduated from Macalester in one year." You know—you know Ife was part of my Macalester work, but I graduated from Macalester in one year. There was a guy there from, uh, Norway or Holland. He graduated from Macalester in two years. He came to Macalester with the equivalent of two years of university work from his high school. Well, I came to Macalester with two years of work, and I only needed one year of work to graduate from Macalester. And I think there are a whole bunch of minority students out there who can make it. And they shouldn't be classified as minority students, they're Americans. They're Americans. And if given the opportunity, I think they would do well at Macalester. Is that all, Madam?

LK: [laughs] I was gonna ask you if you had anything to add and then you added that, so that was great. Um, do you have anything else that you want to add? Otherwise I think we're finished, and thank you.

BC: Well, you know, I don't—you know I'm an attorney. And with all of these years that I have in—like most people I've had my up and downs—I've been married twice. So that's like running a business. You, you have profitable years and you have loss years. Well, marriage is—I considered those you have loss years. Cause it takes a toll on you, financially and otherwise. But what I think I would be able to do is spread the word. And I think that's what would help Macalester—spreading the word. I don't know if Macalester gives athletic scholarships or not, but I know that a lot of black students, when they're going to school, they're going to these highly-rated universities. The males are, because they got an athletic scholarship. When we were there, I think Macalester was known for having the largest, or the longest losing streak for football. And they bragged about it—they said, "Well, because we're not a football school."

LK: Right.

BC: We're not a football school. And I think that Macalester's got to change its marketing to go after students. We're not a football school. I mean, we have a football team. But that's—we're not here to produce modern-day gladiators. Not for the—for the field. We produce gladiators that function—politics, government, business, education. We produce those types of peoples, or individuals.

LK: Mhm.

BC: And I think they do a very good job. I may not be the one you want to hang out to show the people. But oh, I enjoyed myself at Macalester, thoroughly. I wish I could go back again, knowing just a little bit of what I know now.

LK: Wouldn't that be great?

BC: I'd be dangerous.

[end of video]