

Black Women at the University of Maryland

Interviewee: Maxine Gross

Interviewers: Mehrnoosh Mohammadian and Sydney Parker

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Maxine Gross: (showing students photos and documents): pictures and we scan them. So that is what's now the Lakeland Community Heritage Project and Digital Archives. There are some interviews in there, photographs, and key documents.

Mehrnoosh: So, I'm Mehrnoosh Mohammadian.

Sydney: Yes, and I'm Sydney and we're from the Women's Studies 314 class

Maxine Gross: Okay cool

Sydney: Yes, so thank you again for taking this interview. But just for our notes, we are interviewing Ms. Gross at the College Park Community Center. The date is November 17, 2017 and we are conducting this interview as part of a class assignment studying the experiences of black women at the University of Maryland. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed.

Maxine Gross: You're welcome

Mehrnoosh: We really appreciate you making the time to meet with us and I would appreciate if you also introduce yourself for the record.

Maxine Gross: I'm Maxine Gross, a 1981 graduate of the University of Maryland College Park.

Sydney: Okay so, I know that you grew up in the community near the University of Maryland but could you tell us a bit about the place you grew up, your family, and what, if any, relation they had to the university before you had attended?

Maxine Gross: Oh God. That's a big question, that's a huge answer. Okay um, I grew up in the Lakeland community of College Park, it's a historically African American community within College Park. It's basically right across the Route 1 from North gate and my father grew up here. In fact, his parents' house was basically where we're sitting right now and he was born at home and so you're pretty much where he was born. The property that was taken for Paint Branch Elementary School, and later on this community center, was homes of three families: the Gross family, the Green family, and the Gray family. My great grandparents owned the house that's across the street. I grew up in a house that's across on the other corner. I currently live in a house

that's about three blocks from here that was originally built by my great-great-aunt and I purchased it in the 1980s.

Oh! My connection to the University of Maryland, my father worked at the University of Maryland for like 28 years. He retired from the Physical Plant as an Associate Director. His father worked at the University of Maryland for about 40 years in the dining services. His mother, my grandmother, worked at some of the sorority houses and fraternity house from time to time as a cook. My great-grandmother, the lady who lived across the street here, she worked as a laundress at the University of Maryland and some of her other children also worked at the university.

Sydney & Mehrnoosh: Wow! (laughter)

Maxine Gross: Oh! And if you look at the book *Lakeland: African Americans in College Park* there's a picture, and I don't know if it's in this room or not, of the kitchen, I think around nineteen-teens and it has a picture of my grandfather's uncle in the kitchen at the University of Maryland. He's sitting behind a bunch of potatoes, he's peeling potatoes.

(Maxine Gross finding the picture)

Mehrnoosh: Nice! So, I'm going to look at the photobook and select a picture for sure.

Maxine Gross: Oh there it is! It's back there (showing the photo)

Sydney: Oh I see it! That's so crazy!

Maxine Gross: And the picture below it is one of the other ladies from the community and a member of the Gray family who was working at that point in one of the fraternity or sorority houses. So that's them in the kitchen.

Sydney: So what was your reasoning for going to the University of Maryland?

Maxine Gross: I didn't want to go to the University of Maryland. I wanted to go to Hampton. But my father got really upset, he put his foot down, and he basically said "You're the first generation that can go to the University of Maryland and you're going." So that was the end of the conversation, that's why I went to College Park.

Sydney: Okay well that was what we were going to ask next, did your family influence your decision?

Maxine Gross: Mm-hmm!

Mehrnoosh: So what was his reason because as you said, they are working in the University of Maryland generation after generation so did they have some sort of attachment?

Maxine Gross: In service positions. Up until the 1970s there were very limited jobs that African Americans could get on campus. And there weren't that many African American students. When you read about the school being integrated in the 50s but that was very, very limited. There were very few graduate students and they didn't live on campus. In fact, most of the early graduate students lived within the neighborhood. People would board a student, so basically everybody had a student living with them. When I was 5 and 6 years old there was a graduate student, I think he was in Agriculture, and he had a family and he was away from his family to attend school. His children were about the same age as my sister and I were so you know, young children. So he would board with us and then go home on the weekends. But most of the families had a graduate student who lived with them.

Sydney: So, going back to your decision to go to Maryland and finally arriving on campus, do you have any early memories of how it was to first arrive as a student? I know you'd probably been on the campus before, but first as a student?

Maxine Gross: I wasn't really enamored of . . . I don't know it just didn't seem like it was going to be . . . I wasn't coming to my university, I was more coming to go to school if that makes any difference. Because I was familiar with the campus, I wasn't thrilled with orientation and all this whole thing. And I only went to orientation because they told me if I didn't go to orientation I couldn't register for classes. So, I said "Okay I'll go to orientation."

Sydney and Mehrnoosh: (laugh)

Maxine Gross: And I went, and back then it was really easy to get into College Park. All you had to basically do is to graduate from high school in Maryland and then they pretty much let you in. They had early admission, and it was really easy too. If you had a B average and you paid them \$10 or something, they let you in. Even in my high school they weren't very free with the information. I kind of found out about it from somebody the day that the representative from College Park was at the school and I called my grandfather up and told him "They're here! Bring me 10 or 15 dollars, I can go ahead and get admitted to College Park." He said "Okay! I'll bring you the money." He came up to the school, gave me the money and I went to the guidance counselor and they printed out my transcript and I think I had like a 3.0 literally and so I signed up. That's how I got in.

So, I went to orientation, because I had to, and at that point you had to take SATs but they weren't really looking at your scores really. I think they used them for placement. I had already been admitted by the time I took my SATs

Sydney and Mehrnoosh: (laughter)

Maxine Gross: so I was marking anything on the paper. I also found out that you could do concurrent enrollment. Only because somebody told me at the last minute, it wasn't because of the people in the guidance office being forthcoming with information on a universal basis. So I decided "Okay I'll take a class." Math, I struggled with for a long time. I had a really nice math teacher in high school, Mr. Manfred. And Mr. Manfred told me. I struggled through . . . algebra was fine. Geometry not so good and I was struggling through geometry and he said "Okay look, I know you want to go to college. If you stick with me another year and do this Algebra II, I'll help you get through it. That'll be as much math as you're going to need for college." Because he knew that I was going to do Arts and Humanities. So I said "Okay I'll stick with you Mr. Manfred."

Sydney & Mehrnoosh: (laugh)

Maxine Gross: So I decided to go ahead and take my math on campus. So like my last semester of high school, I would go up on campus take a 8 o' clock class and drive the family car to school after that for the last few months of high school. I got through Math110 with a B.

Sydney: Whoo!

Maxine Gross: Yes! But wait a minute. It gets worse. So I filled out all of the papers and they said "Put down your SAT score," I said, "I don't remember what it was!" They said "Okay just put down something" so I put a number on there. I give it to the person who's my counselor and you know, you give them the folder and they start looking at the stuff. The person doesn't look up! (Mimicking): "Oh we'll set you for remedial math and remedial English." I said, "Oh no, look through the papers you'll see my transcript. I already got a B in Math110" and I'm thinking to myself, "Hmm where's this coming from?" So after that I said "You know what? I think I'll run this engine." They used to publish in the catalog, which I'm sure they don't have a catalog anymore, all the classes that you would need for a particular degree...

Sydney: Well they have an online one now '

Maxine Gross: Yeah but it was a literal catalog. Over a course of years the requirements change a little bit so I kept my catalog from when you started because it was whatever it was when you started so I kept that and I kept track of all of my classes. I didn't see anybody until they signed off on my...

Sydney: Graduation? Whoa.

Maxine Gross: I said "You know what!" (laughter) And I kept all of my registration forms and all of my grades and all of that stuff. I said "They're not going to get me!" (laughter)

Sydney: So do you feel like you did that because you didn't trust...well first of all...

Maxine Gross: No I didn't trust them! They looked at me and decided I needed remedial and didn't even look at the documents.

Sydney: Wow.

Maxine Gross: Didn't ask a question. The first thing they started talking about was remedial classes. Now I did fail Math111 because I couldn't understand what the man was saying and I was too stupid to know that that was the problem. (laughter)

Sydney: You were like "Maybe it's just me" (laughter)

Mehrnoosh: You were too young, not stupid (laughter)

Maxine Gross: And he was writing sevens like this (shows something to Sydney and Mehrnoosh) and I was saying I can't figure out how he's getting these answers.

Mehrnoosh: It was just your problem or other students?

Maxine Gross: I have no earthly idea. You know lower level classes like, they have graduate assistants teaching and this guy's English was very heavily accented. Like I said I was too stupid to know that the problem was I couldn't understand what the man was saying! (laughter). By the time I figured out it was a seven, I had already gotten so far behind. I just withdrew and took it again. But anyway. There you go. That's my story.

Sydney: So, did you live on campus . . .

Maxine Gross: No

Sydney: ...or did you live at home?

Maxine Gross: I lived across the street.

Sydney: Got you. How was that? Did you feel like your student life was different than your peers or was everybody going home and commuting?

Maxine Gross: No. There weren't that many blacks period on campus. There were organizations like Black Student Union and there were sororities and fraternities but for some reason I never

really connected with any of them. And it might've been the fact that I could go home. So I just went to class and left.

Sydney: From what you can see, did most black students do that or did they have a place on campus that they all lived in?

Maxine Gross: I think a lot of them did gravitate towards the fraternities and sororities and also Black Student Union.

Sydney: And did they live on campus or did you see a lot of them commuting at all?

Maxine Gross: A lot of them lived on campus.

Sydney: Okay, where did they live like in the freshmen dorms? Or...

Maxine Gross: Wherever.

Sydney: Wherever?

Maxine Gross: Like you know the high rises were fairly new at that point.

Sydney: True. Okay, how did you get back and forth to campus? Did you walk?

Maxine Gross: No, I was too lazy to walk.

Sydney: Same. (laughs)

Maxine Gross: My father was still working at the university at that point so he had a faculty/staff sticker so I could park in any student lot I wanted to.

Mehrnoosh: So you had a fancy life (laughs)

Maxine Gross: Not nary a parking ticket (laughs)

Sydney: Did you spend much time on campus outside of classes? Or was it just purely classes?

Maxine Gross: No. Purely class and assignments. I was a theater major so if I was doing a show, helping to run a show or something (I was not an actress) helping to run a show, I would be there for that but otherwise, no.

Sydney: So getting into that, we would love to talk to you more about major. Did you have any favorite courses or teachers at all? Why did you choose theater?

Maxine Gross: Because I liked it. They had radio television and I think they kind of sort of have it again, sort of kind of now. That's what I wanted to study but early on one of the teachers and I got into this thing where we really didn't like each other and I figured somebody had to go and it wasn't going to be him so it would be me. So I could take a lot of those classes without having to major and keep coming back in his face. So, he didn't get tenure and then he had to leave.

(everyone laughs)

Maxine Gross: Well guess who handed me my degree? He did!

(laughter)

Sydney: He probably was like "Mm-hmm" (laughter)

Maxine Gross: (laughs) He probably never knew. Like I said he didn't get tenure, he had to leave.

Sydney: So did you have any favorite courses while you were here? Whether it was theater or not?

Maxine Gross: No. I mean it was okay.

Sydney: If you didn't act, what kinds of roles did you have in the productions?

Maxine Gross: I ran lights, which they have computers to do now. I moved sets. I was a dresser. That was fun. I helped build costumes, that kind of stuff.

Sydney: So, we have a list of the plays; we went through some of the yearbooks of that time and...*Peter Pan* was there. I know *The Wiz* came out but it probably wasn't on campus, but what productions do you remember being a part of?

Maxine Gross: I know they did *Our Town*. They had done *Music Man*.

Sydney: Yes.

Maxine Gross: They did *Fiddler on the Roof*. This is like more than 30 years ago, who the heck remembers that?

(laughter)

Maxine Gross: Um...those are the ones I can remember

Sydney: I have a list...

Mehrnoosh: ...of the plays?

Sydney: Mm-hmm

Mehrnoosh: So did you have any other African Americans in your class?

Maxine Gross: There were a few

Mehrnoosh: A few?

Maxine Gross: A handful maybe...a few. In any given class, maybe 3...2...maybe just you. But that was the case when I was in high school, too.

Mehrnoosh: So you were actually in a majority white high school probably?

Maxine Gross: That's another very long story. A friend of mine just did her thesis on all of that, her name is Avis Davis. I think...I think her degree is History.

Sydney: From Maryland? Or just...

Maxine Gross: Yeah

Sydney: Okay, nice

Maxine Gross: I mean she just defended her thesis early this week.

Sydney: Awesome!

Maxine Gross: Yeah, well she's my age

(laughter)

Sydney: Some of the plays that were on, the first in 1977 was *Macbeth*. And then in 1978 there was *The Boyfriend*, *As You Like It*, or *Death of a Salesman*. And then 1979 was *Peter Pan* and I wanted to know, *A Raisin In the Sun*?

Maxine Gross: Nmmnm

Sydney: Do you remember that?

Maxine Gross: No

Sydney: And then, there was *The Shadowbox*, *Once Upon A Mattress*, or *Nobody: An Evening With Bert Williams* in 1980? And then there was *The White (Horbit?)* and *Hair* in 1981.

Maxine Gross: I really don't remember a lot of those.

Sydney: But you were on the staff for a lot of them?

Maxine Gross: Yeah

Sydney: Okay Cool

Maxine Gross: laughs: This was 30 years ago, sorry!

Sydney: No it's totally fine!

Mehrnoosh: No no no, don't be!

Sydney: Did you usually ever go to just see the productions or were usually working behind the scenes?

Maxine Gross: Some classes required that you go and I would go and be a usher, that was about it

(everyone laughs)

Sydney: Did you have any women professors or black professors? Or were they mostly white male?

Maxine Gross: Now you know what, a lot of undergraduate courses, you're not taught by professors. Lower level classes a lot of the time they were grad students.

Mehrnoosh: Okay

Maxine Gross: I don't remember any African American instructors.

(pause)

Maxine Gross: Or maybe some of them were adjuncts but they used to have the thing that if the teacher didn't show up, the length of time you have to wait?

Sydney: Yeah 15 minutes (laughs)

Mehrnoosh: They still have this, they all show up though (laughs)

Sydney: Like right at the very last minute

(everyone laughs)

Maxine Gross: Ahhh we lost a few. One time we left and they gave a quiz.

Sydney & Mehrnoosh: Ohhhhhhhh (laughs)

Sydney: That's funny. So outside of theater were there any other favorite classes or professors?

Maxine Gross: No. Like I said, if it was memorable the memory has passed on.

Sydney: So I know you didn't get the support you needed from your advisors or counselors but did you find any support in the professors at all whenever you had trouble in your classes?

Maxine Gross: (shakes head)

Sydney: No? Okay

Maxine Gross: No. The whole attitude was, you're here you get it, fine, if you don't that's okay too. And when I decided to go to graduate school I said "I'm not doing that again" and I went to Bowie. Because it's a much smaller school, it's HBCU, and the people really cared whether you got it or not. University of Maryland, they could give a hoot.

Mehrnoosh: A hoot! (laughs)

Sydney: Yeah I could definitely see that. Do you think it's because it's a big school that that was the case?

Maxine Gross: That was part of it. That might have very well been part of it but it just seemed like they didn't really care if you were there or not.

Sydney: Do you think it had anything to do with you being black or being a woman? Or was that just anybody?

Maxine Gross: I don't think the female thing has anything to do with it. I do think it had something to do with race. Because there just weren't that many African Americans around. And

I didn't get the impression that they were particularly pleased with you being there. And really, at that time, it was generally easier if there were a few blacks. Because my theory is that people don't feel like you're trying to take something from them. It's safer for them. But then when you get a bigger group, then you have to start protecting your stuff. I find that with any group that's coming to make a new majority. It's happening with Hispanics now because now all of a sudden it's not just a few. If the resources are less, we now have to start protecting our stuff. And as numbers have increased people have gotten less hospitable. That's my opinion any way.

Sydney: In our research on the university in the years you were here, we learned that the most popular course was a Sex Education course and we wanted to know if you had heard about it or took it? Or what departments and courses seemed to be popular for African American students if you know any?

Maxine Gross: I have no earthly idea.

(laughter)

Maxine Gross: I didn't take anything that was particularly...I didn't take Black Studies or anything remotely similar to that. I took that book with the list of courses and I went down until I got to the end of the page (laughs)

Sydney: For the few black students that you knew who were here, did you see them congregate in any of the specific majors?

Maxine Gross: Majors?

Sydney: Yes, or even schools

Maxine Gross: No

Sydney: it was all pretty much what you were in?

Maxine Gross: Yeah and it was like a few everywhere but it was only a few.

Sydney: Alright so to get into student life, were you involved in any of the student...

Maxine Gross: NO

(everyone laughs)

Mehrnoosh: Why was that?

Maxine Gross: I didn't feel that it was a place where I was wanted. I wasn't comfortable. I mean I was comfortable going to class and going home. And that's what I did. Now, I don't know what other people's experience was. And I think, like I said, because I had that option. I was five minutes away from home. Why would I want to be up there? And good parking!

(laughter)

Mehrnoosh: This is a big part of that, understandable

(everyone laughs)

Sydney: But how did you make friends with other students? Were your friends usually in your classes or did you not need to make friends? Did you have friends in the neighborhood?

Maxine Gross: I had classmates, I didn't really have friends.

Sydney: Were there any other particular campus communities that you fell into at all other than...

Maxine Gross: Nope!

Sydney: Alright (laughs)

Maxine Gross: Have I made myself clear? (laughs)

Sydney: Did you go to any sporting events at all?

Maxine Gross: No. One of my father's responsibilities was special events so the football games, he did logistics, football, basketball. Basketball was good, they actually won. And so I went to a lot of games when I was in high school but strangely enough I didn't go to any when I was in college. And I've probably been to five since then.

Mehrnoosh: So you said you were uncomfortable, but at any point because the student life is interesting for everyone. They are young, they are coming to campus, they're going to have this freedom, going around meeting new people but you said that you never felt comfortable or that sense of belonging was kind of absent. So, have you ever had this feeling that I wish it was a more open community for me as a woman, African American, or just comparing your life with other students?

Maxine Gross: No. But you have to understand the times a little bit more. When I went to middle school...okay I'll try to make this as short as I can. I lived in an African American community surrounded by European American communities. That's where I grew up. If I went to Berwyn, which is the next community over, I knew that those children were likely to throw stones or set their dogs on me. The elementary school I went to was first completely African American and then over time through struggle a few whites started coming to the school. And ultimately a handful finished 6th grade with me but within that kindergarten to first grade there had been several legal battles to try to integrate the local schools which were unsuccessful.

So, one summer in particular, a lot of European Americans were scheduled to come to our school but those children did not come. They moved away. So, you have that going on. In middle school, I went from a basically African American elementary school to a middle school which was primarily European American where I would be the only African American or perhaps one of two African Americans in a class. So I joke sometimes that Greenbelt Junior High School, which is now Greenbelt Middle School with a new building but anyway, was integrated when the kids from Lakeland pulled up on the bus. So there were basically 30 African American kids in the whole school. So, you take that, then there was bussing which took place while I was in middle school. And you had all of these black kids coming in who were bussed from halfway across the county to go to this middle school. There was a lot of friction, not only between the whites and the blacks but then between the kids from my neighborhood and the new kids. So then you went to high school where again, I was generally in classes where there were 1 or 2 African Americans. So, personally, I had been in a lot of situations where I was the only. And to put myself back into that, willingly, when I could just get in my car and go home did not, to me, seem like a reasonable thing to do. (laughs)

Mehrnoosh: Understandable

Sydney: Definitely. That all makes a lot of sense. I guess like, how would you describe...I mean you kind of did but even during the times you were at the University, how would you describe the political climate? When we had looked into some of the newspapers, one of the things, I can't find it on here, but one of the things we found was that there was protests that were going on within the black community for, what am I trying to say, retention. The retention rates had gone down within the University of Maryland and *The Diamondback* was saying one thing, *The Black Explosion* was saying another in terms of if it was racist or not and if resources were needed or not. Were you ever a part of these conversations or knew about these things?

Maxine Gross: No. But like I said, that was regular. That was not news. I mean, look at the University of Maryland now. Do you *really* think they want African Americans on campus?

Sydney: I mean, I think that there's definitely strides against it but there's also initiatives, you know, for it but those initiatives weren't put in place until like recently. You know what I mean? So it's like did they for a while? I don't know.

Maxine Gross: I mean, you have to think back a little bit. Why are African Americans unable to score at the top of standardized tests? Well maybe it has to do with the fact that they didn't have resources from a young age to be able...Head Start began in the 50s because children weren't able to start on an even keel, their language wasn't quite where it needed to be, their vocabulary...how you teach a kid to read when their vocabulary isn't in good shape? And so, if that's where you're starting and if there's still lack of economic parity and you have parents who are struggling to just try to keep body and soul together...yes, some parents are able to bolster their kids and be there for the teacher's meetings and if the child is struggling in a particular area, to get them the help they need. But a lot of times it's not because the parent doesn't care or doesn't want to, it's that they're trying to, do I go to the teacher's meeting and lose half a day of work or do I have some prayer of paying the rent? I don't have the answers but unless we as a society make different choices, people are still going to be asking the same questions.

Sydney: So I know that even though you weren't involved in the campus communities and you definitely were very independent in terms of getting your classes out the way, were there any other resources you used on campus like for example, the Counseling Center had a group called The Transition Group for Black Students? I know that's a really niche community...

Maxine Gross: I never knew anything about those types of resources.

Sydney: And never utilized any of the different resources on campus?

Maxine Gross: No

Sydney: Thank you for describing life for black students at least for UMD at that time. Was there any staff at all? Not even faculty, but staff that you found supportive at UMD?

Maxine Gross: No. I'm sorry (laughs)

Mehrnoosh: We actually want to know that, it says a lot!

Sydney: It does, it's very surprising. So, we found a lot of copies of *The Black Explosion* newspaper and I know it started around that time but did you ever pick up any of those? Did you ever read any of them? Were they helpful?

Maxine Gross: I might've looked at it. My sister was on the staff for a really short time I believe and did some work with that but she didn't finish at College Park.

Sydney: Why do you believe she didn't?

Maxine Gross: You'd have to ask her about that I really can't say but she finished at Bowie and did her graduate work at Morgan.

Maxine Gross: Say anything?

Sydney: Yeah that does say a lot.

(everyone laughs)

Sydney: That's interesting though, this shift from...I mean I never even thought about that until you said it earlier in the conversation, the shift from going to a predominately white institution and feeling more at home, more prepared, and more engaged than in a university in itself at a black one versus a...you have both of those experiences so thank you for sharing that perspective. Do you know of a relationship at all between the black students, or even yourself, and the outside community?

Maxine Gross: As a student?

Sydney: As a student of the university

Maxine Gross: The students and the university were very, very separate. And that only began to change with the current administration, the current president. He's made a huge difference with community relationships.

Sydney: Yes.

Mehrnoosh: Nice.

Sydney: On campuses now, students are often concerned with encounters with the campus police. Do you remember any concerns about policing when you were a student?

Maxine Gross: No

Sydney: No? Okay. Did you ever see a presence because I know that...

Maxine Gross: Sure

Sydney: And was it like campus police or was it Prince George's County Police?

Maxine Gross: Campus police

Sydney: Alright, so were you ever employed there at the University of Maryland or outside the University of Maryland while you were going to school?

Maxine Gross: Was I employed? Yeah, I had some stupid jobs. Let's see, I worked as a key punch operator, that thing was antiquated when I did it, that was stupid and I was really bad at it.

Sydney: Where was this?

Maxine Gross: Some building on campus where they were doing somebody's graduate work or something to try to do the...you ever heard of the computer card? Like data cards? To put somebody's research on cards so that they could run it.

Sydney & Mehrnoosh: Oh yeah!

Maxine Gross: Anyway, I did that. I worked at a department store, that's the longest job I had over at Prince George's Plaza.

Sydney: Alright, nice

Maxine Gross: Where Macy's is now, it used to be Hecht Company. I worked there for a few years. And I got a student job as a cleaner, sort of, towards the end of my career.

Mehrnoosh: So thank you so much!

Maxine Gross: All I remember (laughs)

Sydney: Thank you, do you have any other lasting things you want to say about your experience at the University of Maryland during that time? Positive or negative or anything like that.

Maxine Gross: Since my experience at the University of Maryland, I would not encourage a young African American to go to school there, even now. Unless they are a very strong individual. If I had to do it again, I don't think I would. So there. (laughs)

Sydney: Thank you so much.

Mehrnoosh: It says a lot.

Sydney: It does say a lot so thank you for your input.

Mehrnoosh: Thank you so much for your time, we really appreciate it.

Maxine Gross: I lived to tell the tale.