Mabel Deloise Strum (Dee Dee Strum) Interview

M: I'm Megan Smedley and the date is December 1, 2017. We are at studio A at Tawes Hall in the University of Maryland, conducting this interview with you as part of a class assignment studying the experiences of black women at the University of Maryland. Also present are Montoya O'Neal and Praise Carson. Thank you, Ms. Dee Dee Strum, for agreeing to be interviewed. To begin, would you say your full name and the years you were at UMD?

S: Sure. Um, I go by Dee Dee Strum. For registration purposes, I use my formal name, which was Mabel Deloise Strum, and that's how it appears on my diploma from the University of Maryland, College Park. I completed my undergraduate degree in December of 1974, from the school of Human Ecology in the area Family and Community Development. I subsequently enrolled in my master's program here at College Park as well, through the benefit of a teaching fellowship, which I was awarded through the school of Human Ecology. I completed my Master's of Science degree in Community Development in December of 1977.

M: Okay, that answered a couple of other questions I was gonna ask as well. So, before we get to UMD, let's talk a little bit about your past. Where did you grow up?

S: Actually, I was a military dependent, so I had the great benefit of growing up in many places. Born in Texas, my dad was stationed at Texas airbase as he was an air force officer, and we were in and out of Texas for a number of years, but we lived in Alaska as well. Subsequent to living in Texas, we lived in Detroit, Michigan for about three or four years, and from there we went to Germany, and we were in Europe for four or five years. Then my dad was assigned to NSA at Fort Meade, and that's how we landed here in Maryland in 1966. So I was able to start my high school years at Anne Arundel High School as freshman and a sophomore. And then we moved from Anne Arundel County into Howard County, Maryland, and I completed my high

school years, my junior and senior years, at Atholton High School in what is now Columbia, Maryland. At the time, it was Simpsonville, Maryland, but Columbia has annexed all of that area.

M: Okay. I know you mentioned to Praise that you started at a community college—

S: No.

M: No? Oh, Praise told us that. Okay, never mind.

S: I did start at another college. But it was not a community college. I did my freshman year of college actually at Indiana University Bloomington, which is actually one of the big ten schools. My dad finished at Indiana University in 1947 with a degree in business administration and subsequently joined the Air Force in the first wave of black officers in the new United States Air Force. That was the last branch of the US military, that was started in about 1948. So he went back in after college—he was in World War II as an army, but enlisted man, he had been drafted out of college into World War II. When he came out, used the GI Bill, went to Indiana University Bloomington, finished his degree in business administration there, and then joined the Air Force, was sent to officer candidate school in Texas, which is where he met my mom. So, fast forwarding, 20 years later, when I finished high school, he decided that he was going to send me from Maryland to his alma mater, which was Indiana University Bloomington. So that's how I left Maryland, went to Indiana, and I only did my freshman year there. I recognized some years later that I was just rebellious both homesick as well as rebellious. I did not want to go to IU, I wanted to stay in Maryland. That's not what he had plans for, so I ended up going where he was spending his money, which was at his alma mater, IU. And then I came back here for my sophomore year through my graduate school years. So that's probably what Praise was

remembered, that I did not do my freshman year at the University of Maryland, but it was at a big ten school.

M: Okay. So, I get the sense that your father was a little bit strict on you growing up, since he made you go to IU.

S: Yes. Strict, I would say yes. He had his parameters, he was a military officer, so, you know, we grew up in a household with certain expectations. There were rules, but lots of love and we all are thankful that he was someone who had great standards and expectations, because he instilled those in us, starting even before we started elementary school. We all understood we would go to college. Now, we didn't necessarily understand what a college was; we just knew that school wasn't over until we finished college. So, when people would ask us as soon as we started kindergarten or first grade, "what are you going to do when you go to school?" We would answer by saying, "oh, we're going to go to college." And they'd say, "well, that would come later." And we would say, "oh, yeah." So it was just this built-in expectation in us that our education would not be complete until we completed college. And the whole issue and discussion about where we were going to college didn't start coming up until we were juniors and seniors in high school. I did have the benefit of him allowing me to go through the exercise of applying to colleges, choosing them, selecting them, visiting some colleges. He just never told me he had already made the decision. What he explained later was that, when I asked, "why did you let me go visit colleges, why did you, you know, give me the money for application fees for all these colleges that I wanted to go to if you already decided where I was going to go?" And he said, "because every experience is a learning experience and you needed to learn how to do that." He said, "yes, you're going to IU," and I said, "I don't even know what an IU is." He said, "Indiana University." And I said, "where you went?" I said, "in the middle of a cornfield?" He said, "yes." He said, "one of the best universities in the country, and that's where you're

going to go." I said, "well, I didn't even apply there." He said, "no, you didn't." He said, "I took care of all that." So that's how I ended up at IU.

M: When you were applying to colleges, did you apply to University of Maryland?

S: No.

M: No?

S: Not at that time, I didn't. But I will say that I did already have an idea of what I wanted to major in. But they say every freshman experience is the same experience, and that's so true. That's when you are understanding more about what it means to go to college, meeting others, hearing what they're going to major in, and then exploring what avenues you have to go through in order to get to your major. The reason that, in the end, he did concede with regards to my transferring back to University of Maryland is that IU did not have what I wanted to major in. There was no community development program at Indiana University. But University of Maryland did have a community development program, which was my interest.

M: Okay. So, just trying to figure out the timeline here. So, you graduated from Maryland with your undergraduate degree in December 1974. So that meant—when did you first start at Indiana?

S: I started—I graduated high school in May of 1970, so I started August of 1970 as a freshman at IU Bloomington. Then I went one year. I transferred back here and I did not come to College Park in the fall of 71. I sat out a semester. I started January of 71, which is why my completion was December of 74, because I had to make up that other semester.

M: Okay, that makes sense.

S: But I will say that my dad's reasoning behind my going away to school made all the sense in the world once I was an adult. But even at the time, when my mother and I were both protesting about me going so far away to school, he said, "that's exactly why she's going away for school." He said, "everybody needs to leave home and learn how to be responsible for themselves and their decisions." He said, and to my mother, his comment was, "that you need to know that all five of these kids are going to grow up, make choices, leave home, and live their own lives." And he said, "and it starts with her." I'm the oldest. So, I have to say, as an adult in retrospect, I know that I did come to understand that my dad was absolutely right, because it was a great experience. And later, I regret it that I transferred to College Park. Not necessarily because of College Park, but because I then, as I said earlier, I recognize that I did it my first semester of my freshman year, before Thanksgiving. So I'd only been at IU eight weeks, and I put in the paperwork to transfer to College Park without my dad's permission. Again, I recognize now that I was homesick and just rebellious because I was where he wanted me to be, not where I wanted to be. Because by my second semester my freshman year at IU, I wanted to stay, but I couldn't, because as an out of state student, I had not renewed for my dorm. Even though he thought I had. And so I had to tell him what I had done, because then I was hopeful he would let me live off-campus in an apartment. And he said, "no, you've made your first adult decision without consulting me. You want to go to College Park that badly, you'll come back and you'll go to College Park." So, that's the story about how I got back here to Maryland and finished my undergrad and graduate degree in a major that I wanted, and so, from that standpoint, I was very pleased to be here at College Park and have the opportunity to study what I wanted to study. And in the process, I wound up with a fantastic professor and mentor who took an interest in me, and he was and African American professor and mentor, of which there were very few at that time at the University of Maryland College Park campus. So in the end, as they

say, it's always by God's hand and God's plan, everything worked out well. But the ending to that story was, as soon as I finished my degree in December of 77 with my masters, the only job offer I had in the country happened to be in Indianapolis, Indiana. And I went back to Indiana and I stayed there for the next 37 years.

M: Wow. So, when you transferred to the University of Maryland, what was that like, coming in as a transfer student? Because nowadays, transfer students aren't too out of the norm. How was that back in the 70s, did you feel like the odd man out, transferring in?

S: In some respects, I did, because I think that with anyone who starts college as a freshman, you get introduced and immersed in that campus's culture immediately. And so, I came here as a sophomore, and those that I were meeting that were also sophomores already had a year on me, so to speak, of what it meant to be a University of MD student. So in that context, yes, I felt out of step. I missed the fact that then I was not at IU, where I had gotten into my stride as a freshman. I knew the campus, I had pledged a sorority my freshman year at IU, so I was missing my sorority sisters and friends. I would also say that the other disadvantage that I felt on an emotional level at that point was because I started in January, I was not on campus. I commuted. So, not only was I a transfer student, I was a commuter student, and it wasn't until my junior year that I started feeling any connection to College Park community as my college community.

M: Okay. You said a lot there, I'm just trying to process it as to what we're going to use. So, were there a lot of people already here that you went to high school with, because you were local?

S: Actually, I'm glad you asked that question. Yes, it did make it easier. It did make it easier for me, being a transfer student, because there were—there were two people, two girl friends that I had in high school, who had started as freshmen here. I also had a cousin and a brother who were two years younger than me, they were the same age, so when I was a junior here, they were freshman. My father decided he wasn't fighting anyone else about where they went to college, my brother didn't want to go out of state, and he had won a Senatorial scholarship and he came straight here to College Park. So, they both came with their own sort of constituency and group of friends, so I wasn't a stranger, so to speak. There were people that I already knew. The other facet that made the transition less painful and easier is the sorority I had pledged at Bloomington, at IU. And this gets to the heart of your interviews. There were no African American Greek organizations here at College Park when I started at College Park. There was a group of young black women here, who had started an organization called TIAKA, those interested in Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority incorporated, which goes by the acronym AKA. So there was a group that were TIAKAs, and somehow my brother, who I said was a freshman, he was pledging—he pledged his first semester of his freshman year, which my parents did not know either—he was pledging Phi Beta Sigma, which was a black Greek fraternity that was the first black Greek fraternity on this campus. They'd only been here about a year and they started here because there were two brothers, Ben and his brother, who had gone to Lincoln University, in Pennsylvania and they had pledged there. Somehow or another, I don't remember the story, they ended up here at College Park and there were no black Greek organizations. So, they started the process through their national headquarters to start their chapter of Phi Beta Sigma here at College Park. That's how my brother got involved in pledging Phi Beta Sigma. And that process of him pledging as a freshman, he shared with some others that his sister had transferred here from Indiana University and she had pledged AKA at IU. That information, somehow or another, got to these other young women who were trying to start an AKA chapter, and they actually came looking for me through my brother. And that's where I met the women

who are my friends to this day, because they said, “we understand that you already pledged AKA at another college,” and they said, “we’re trying to start a chapter here, would you join with us to charter a chapter here at College Park?” And so that gave me a home base, so to speak, with a group of young African American women here at College Park, and that became my social network, with the TIAKAs, and I was a member of the TIAKAs.

M: I’m going to start with AKA now, since you already brought it up. So, when you were with the TIAKAs, when did you formally form AKA?

S: We were chartered on March 4th of 1974.

M: I’m sure that’s a date that you have perfectly memorized.

S: That is correct. That is correct. And we’ll be celebrating 45 years, I think, if it’s not this coming March of 2018, then it’s March of 2019. But pretty soon, I think, we’ll be celebrating our 45th anniversary as a chapter of the national Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority. So, that was March of 74, and by then, because it took us two years, or two and a half years to get that far, I was a senior. Most of the others who pledged with me were seniors as well; we all took that journey together for two years to charter that chapter here at College Park. So there was a critical mass of my line sisters who graduated in May, but again, because I had been a transfer student and lost that semester, I was here until December. So, I did have the benefit of being able to pledge the first line after the charter line, which was the fall of 1974.

M: So, you were with the initial charter group that pledged in. Did you have a leadership role?

S: Oh, yes.

M: Okay, what was that?

S: Well, on the charter line, I was not an officer, because they had already started TIAKA before I had gotten here. But I was both sort of internally a TIAKA and at the same time, an advisor, because I'd had the experience of pledge AKA at another school. I think what's important to know, particularly for the record, is that, while I had pledged at IU, I did not go over, so I was not yet a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority. Back in the old days, you pledged as much as a year. So I started pledging in December of 1970, which was the first semester of my freshman year. When May came, they still had not taken us over. I had then transferred back to College Park, I was no longer a student at IU, came home for the summer, and they said that they were going to take our line over the first week or two of the fall year. So, much to my dad's dismay and unhappiness, I actually missed—I actually went back to IU, just for the purpose of going over for the first two weeks. I stayed in the dorm room of a line sister. But they never took us over, and my dad called and said, "you better get back here. I don't care anything about you going over AKA, you need to get back to Maryland." So I came back without having gone over. So I was both a pledge as well as something of an informal advisor to the TIAKAs, because I had gone through the experience of already having pledged at another school. Now, subsequently, when we were chartered, I was the first dean of pledges. So what I said, I had the benefit because I did not graduate with the other seniors because I had to do an extra semester because of my being a transfer student. I pledged the first line of AKA at College Park and I did so in the role of dean of pledges.

M: And while you were a master's student, I'm assuming you were still involved?

S: Well, I wasn't a master's student then. Remember, I was still a senior, completing the fall of 74.

M: Yes. When you started your master's program—

S: When I started my master's program, no, I was just, at that point, I was just somebody that was still on campus and an informal advisor to the undergrads that were here.

M: Okay. Obviously, the AKA charter is still around now.

S: Yes, that's right.

M: But at the time, did you have any difficulty finding women that were willing to participate and who wanted to be involved?

S: No, I would say, as charter line members, the reason that journey took us two, two and half years—well, when I say that, I was involved for two years, but the group that had started before I even was at College Park, there were two people, they had started TIAKA. So, for them, it was a two and a half year journey to actually get across the line for us to be chartered. But the struggle that we had during that two year period was that we did have lots of young women who were interested in being AKA, but to be chartered, everybody had to maintain, I believe, it was a 2.8 grade point average or higher. We kept losing young women on line because of the grade point average requirement, and we had to have a, I believe, the minimum was 12. In order to be chartered, you had to have 12 with a GPA of 2.8 or higher. And so, we would sometimes, you know, get to the end of the semester, and we always started with 12, 13, 14, 15, we'd get to the end of the semester, we had to turn in grades to the national headquarters office for our group, and then we'd find there was only 8, 9, 10 that had maintained the GPA. So then they'd say, well, you're going to have to go find some other young women. We would find them, we'd ask, "what's your GPA?" They would tell us their GPA and they would come on line with us, and

pledging, and we'd get to the end of the semester and we'd lose somebody else. Now we'll say that one of the difficulties, which goes, I think, to the heart of your purpose for this interview, which was what was it like to be a young African American woman at College Park in those days, is that, for many, it was a financial struggle. The early seventies, which is when we were in college, was right after the sixties. The late sixties, of course, had seen the advent of the riots in Baltimore, Washington DC, and most major cities across the US. In response to the riots, they started at the federal level, President Lyndon B. Johnson started his war on poverty programs. Colleges and universities were directed to be more aggressive in outreach to inner-city minority youth, both male and female, to make opportunities for them to get into school through special initiatives. And so, even while I was at IU, when I went there as an out of state student and I was meeting lots of other African American students there, in my dorm and then when I pledged, and just meeting kids around campus, the first thing they would ask me is, "are you in the groups program? Where are you from, which group are you with?" I didn't even understand what that meant. After the second or third time, I asked somebody, "what does that mean, why do they keep asking me what group I'm with or if I'm in the groups program?" And they said, "oh, because most of the black kids here are, you know, from Gary, Indiana, Fort Wayne, Indiana, Evansville, Indiana, Indianapolis, Indiana—the big cities in Indiana." And they said, "groups program was what IU started to bring in black students from the inner city." Well, fast forwarding when I got to College Park, evidently there had been a similar effort in Maryland, and I found with the girls that I was pledging with, several of them said to me, and I can't even remember what it was called here, but they said, "are you going to the meeting?" And I said, "I don't know what that is," but when they explained it to me, because they were out of Baltimore city, I said, "oh, in Indiana, that's called the groups program." I said, "no, I'm not on the groups program." And they said, "how'd you get the money to come to school?" And I said, "my dad is helping to pay for it," and then I would give them the explanation that I worked too, and that was another reason I didn't have what I would call sort of the full on campus college experience,

because I was working and going to school and one of the other things my father said is, “you made the decision without consulting me to transfer back to College Park. Fine, you want to be an adult. Then you help figure out how you’re going to pay for it.” So I went to work at that point, along with his assistance, but only when I really, really needed his assistance. So, I had no concept that there was such a heavy reliance on student loans and other sources of funds—they had Pell grants and other grants for low income students, I guess in general. Again, I started out with my introduction that my dad was a military career officer, so when I went to IU, he paid for it. So again, I have to say, it wasn’t part of my experience or my consciousness except that, as I was here and again through the AKA experience trying to charter the line, not only did we lose girls because of GPAs, we lost quite a few because they didn’t have the money to go the distance. I had a roommate who was pledging along with us, along with me, and she ended up dropping out of school, going to work at a bank, and then taking night classes at the University of DC, in order to finish up her degree in accounting, because her family didn’t have the money. So, again, it was through my relationships with others who came here a different route than I had, in terms of the financial route, and I would, I do want to talk about that, because I started with you earlier by saying that everything is by God’s hand and God’s plan and I do, I have believed that my entire life. And I ended up here with a black college professor and mentor, as I had explained, his name was Dr. Noel Myricks, and I would say that, had it not been for Dr. Noel Myricks, my journey at College Park would have been probably as painful and isolated as that experienced by my peers. And my, even continuing on to get my master’s was because Dr. Myricks made it possible for me to get a teaching fellowship. Now, the experience of those that I pledged with, others that I wasn’t necessarily pledging with, because you asked whether we had difficulty getting, you know, women interested and pledging, no. No, they wanted to, and some were able to, others weren’t. There is a cost to pledging and being part of a sorority, some, you know, started out and then said, “hey, I can barely pay for books, I can’t pay these fees that are associated with pledging” or whatever. So we lost them for financial

reasons, we lost them because of GPA, some we just lost to school period. And I think that, while UMD College Park did make an extensive effort to comply with whatever laws or regulations existed at the time to show that they were doing recruitment and outreach to minor students in inner cities, to low income, disadvantaged youth, that type of thing. What they did not do was develop a strategy and a plan to provide the supports that the students would need in order to make it through, and I saw that regardless of gender, because my brother experienced the same thing in his fraternity. They lost a lot of guys that he pledged with and others that he was just friends with in the dorm because they didn't have the money. And again, they came from low income, inner city, disadvantaged, whatever the terms were then, situations. And so, they didn't have families with the funds to necessarily help them. And yes, they could get, I guess to some extent, they could get the loans, they could get the Pell grants or whatever, but it didn't take care of expenses that they needed. It might take care of what I call the university's cost, the tuition, the fees, maybe room and board. But you all are college students—it takes a whole lot more than that to survive, and so some of them didn't even have meal plans in order to get their meals. I remember hearing that from my brother because he would talk about all the guys that would come to his room, because the one thing I will say is that my parents made sure that, every week when they went grocery shopping, there were two of us at College Park at the time, they were buying groceries. I mean, all we had to do was call home and say, "would you put that on the grocery list, would you get it," and my mom would bring it to campus to us. Or we had cars, we'd run home, we'd pick up the stuff. And so, soon we figured out that our friends, my sorority sisters, his fraternity brothers, didn't have that advantage. So I remember, one day, my dad said, "how much are you all eating up over there in College Park?" He said, "every week, it seems like I'm getting more and more groceries." My mother said, "oh, honey, what difference does it make?" She said, "the kids share." She knew what we were doing, and my dad said, "oh, okay," like that. So it was, I think, just an absence of supporting that, fast forwarding, I see now, universities have built in through programs and

structures that they have called success programs. And I found that one, moving back to Maryland, and because I'm a believer in lifelong learning, I had vacated my business that I had run for 37 years in Indiana, to come home to take care of my elderly parents. That's what brought me back here. But I knew that, on an emotional level, I couldn't stay in the house, every day, day after day, watching my dad die. And so, I started looking for an outlet, and for me, that became Anne Arundel Community College. I already had a bachelor's degree, I had a master's degree, I had a very successful background in history, but they had lots of classes for older adults and I was an older adult at that point. But in looking through the catalog and just becoming then acquainted with the community college system in Maryland, I saw that they have these things called success programs. And they have programs for first generation college students. Those things didn't exist in the early seventies, when you truly had first generation college enrollment. And these were kids who did not necessarily have parents who had gone to college, they didn't have parents who had finished high school, even. Again, in my situation, it was different. Not only had my dad finished college, he had finished at a big ten university in the forties, which was a majority white university, and people used to be shocked when, in passing, if I had said something about, you know, when my dad—when they'd say, "what year did you start here?" And I'd say, "well, you know, I started here really as a sophomore because I went to IU my first year, then I came back here," and then they'd say, "what's an IU?" And then I'd say, "Indiana University." They'd say, "what's that?" I'd say, "well, it's a big ten university in the Midwest, and my dad made me go out there but I came back." So I'm saying that it was all an education for me as well, in terms of the routes that other African American students had taken in order to even get in the door at UMD. Did I answer your question or did I drift from it?

M: You did.

S: Okay.

M: So, granted, people going through financial situations and struggles like that are difficult in itself, but as someone who was trying to build and charter a sorority, how frustrating was it that every single semester for two years you came so close and then it all fell apart and you'd have to wait another whole semester before you could try again?

S: It was frustrating. But I have to say that, while it was frustrating in the context of getting to the finish line and getting that charter for AKA sorority, it was more painful for all of us losing the women that we had bonded with that were pledging with us, because of either grades or because of financials. And many times, we found that the reasons that their grades dropped was because they were such financial strain. It's just like the programs you have before school and after school for public school kids to make sure they get something to eat, and they say, "well, a child can't learn if they start school hungry" or whatever. Well, I think it's no different being a college student. If you're constantly worried about how much longer you're going to be able to stay here, how you're going to cover this and that, then the effort that you need to put into, or what I call the maximized effort that you need to put into excelling at school, at your grades, it's not there. And for all of us, it was much more frustrating when heard the reasons from them, when we'd say, "ugh, what do you mean you don't have the GPA? What happened?" And I remember this one girl that just broke down and cried, and said, "I'm not like the rest of you. I couldn't keep up my grades, work in the cafeteria, I was trying to take my money and help my family at home with what I was making in the cafeteria, I didn't have all the time that I needed to put in to studying." That made the rest of us very pained. Because I have to say, for probably the majority of us that made it from start to finish with TIAKA and across the line, when we looked at it years and years later, and we would say, "oh, does anybody hear from so-and-so?" or "whatever happened to her, you used to be really good friends with her, did you keep in touch with her after she dropped out of school?" We, one time, we did get into a discussion about the dynamics of those of us who made it through versus the others, and I will tell you what

the difference was. Almost every one of us that stayed the course with the grades, the finances, we came from different types of households. My dad was a military career officer, Detrese's father was a military career officer, Singleton's mom was an assistant principal at a school, Cheryl Petty was an only child, Regina was an only child and both of her parents worked for the federal government. So when we thought about it years later—Sheila Jones went on to Harvard law school—her background was that she too had come from an African American family that had two or three generations of college graduates. So what we realized is that when we started talking about those who we had lost and we started really examining the dynamics of why they didn't finish, and then we'd start talking and someone would say, "oh, remember she was having so many financial problems" or "she couldn't spend enough time in the computer lab" and then somebody said, "well, so-and-so wasn't even able to buy their books." We started looking at the differences in our backgrounds, and there weren't many of us, there were only 13 of us that went over. We made it by one person, we needed 12, 13 of us went over. But three joined us the semester before we were chartered, and so we didn't even have long to get to know them. But what we did find was that, except for those that had been there with tenure, that we came from a much more stable background and we came from families with more resources, or some of them, as I said, were only children, so even if their parents struggled, it wasn't as much of a struggle because there weren't other children at home that they had to feed, clothe, and send through elementary, middle school, or high school. They just had that one daughter who was at college, and that was their parents' dream, to get their child into college, and they were able to put whatever they could into helping that one child. There were three on my line that were only children.

M: So, would you say that UMD, in and of itself, gave financial aid and showed that they were helping students on paper and trying to save face so that someone would say, "oh, yeah, UMD

is great," but the reality of it was that they weren't necessarily helping students, making sure that every kid was able to buy books and eat?

S: I think the reality of it, then, was that it was still, again, it was at that cusp where universities in America had existed for decades, hundreds of years, particularly as white universities, and there is a big distinction, between the majority universities and the historically black colleges and universities, which are referred to as HBCUs. HBCUs, for over a hundred years, always understood that the black student they had was, more likely than not, struggling. So, they always had, as part of their culture, as part of their whole structure, built in systems of support. Majority universities did not, because they operated under the assumption that, well, if you got into college, it's because you have the ability to go to college. I don't think they ever thought in the context, and I don't think, at that point, it even really had anything to do with color, because I've heard white kids back when I was in college, who talked about their dads going to college after WWII with the GI Bill. The GI Bill was really what opened up colleges and universities to lots and lots of people regardless of race or color. But some of them came from backgrounds where, maybe just the father had graduated from college, or some of them were first generation, and they too floundered. They had—who was it you get office hours with?

M: Advisors.

S: Advisors. I wanted to say counselors, but I thought, that's high school, when you have a high school counselor. Yeah, you're assigned—everybody here was assigned an advisor, I guess on paper. But advisors didn't make outreach. I was lucky enough to have a black advisor, he made a point that any African American student he had that was assigned to him, he didn't wait for them to ask for office hours. He gave you a schedule that you would see him on, and then he talked to you about being black at UMD, but there weren't that many black professors or black

advisors here for the number of black students that there were and in particular, maybe, with the majors that they had. So there was an absence of a strategy or maybe just an absence of an understanding or the unwillingness or inability at that point for those with the power to think differently, to really say, “we’ve gotta establish a whole different culture and paradigm because, not only is it important to get these students into College Park, it’s important to keep them here.” So I see many, many universities now because over the years, I got more and more interested in what colleges and universities are doing, and I started reading about things they were doing to stress retention and graduation rates. College Park just turns you in and turns you out. I mean, even back then, the enrollment was reported to be 40,000. What is the enrollment now?

M: Undergrad, it’s roughly like 37 or 38,000.

S: Okay, and with graduate students, what is it?

M: Probably like 44.

S: Okay. I just remember a big number that was being thrown around back then was that UMD had 40,000 students. Now it was also, in terms of innovation, UMD was the first one, I believe, in the country to have overseas campuses with military bases. So I don’t know if the 40,000 number that I was hearing back then meant worldwide. Most state universities did not have that kind of presence around the globe. But I remember when we lived in Europe, I told you that my dad was in the military, hearing about UMD because there were military personnel that were taking classes at UMD, but we were overseas. So, I will say that, in terms of looking at enrollment and numbers, UMD was a leader, as far as I can see both then and in retrospect, with getting students enrolled. I don’t know if they had great success in the area of retention and graduation rates back then as I suspect they do now, because there’s just an emphasis

worldwide with community colleges, any four year college or university, on retention and graduation. And so, we were losing a lot of minority students here at College Park, because they were coming in but they weren't finishing.

M: So, I'm trying to think of where I want to go, because I have certain things that I have to knock off. I want to go back to just talking about the courses and the curriculum and the education.

S: I'm glad you do, because I want to talk about that.

M: Okay.

S: Okay.

M: So… Okay, so, when you first came in, it was your sophomore year, but it was in January. Were you assigned that specific advisor?

S: No, I wasn't. And I'm glad you asked that question, because now that allows me to talk about how I became introduced to him. I'd often heard people say that they wouldn't send their child to a huge university like IU or UMD because kids were just a number, that classes had as many as 300 students. I was in a psychology class here at College Park, and there had to have been an auditorium with 300 students. It's probably still true today. But there were hundreds of students enrolled in this psychology class, and I can't remember if it was like one of my requirements or I took it because it satisfied a requirement, but I was in this psychology class and it was a huge auditorium, lots and lots of students. Professor on a stage, you know, down front, lecturing behind a lectern, all of us lined up in rows. I don't even remember what building it was in. And

there were two dynamics that were going on as the semester went along in this psychology class. One was, at the outset, he asked, he said, “just by a show of hands, how many of you have a preference for exams that are made up of essay questions?” My hand went up, lots of other hands went up. I didn’t think anything of it. He said, “how many of you are interested in multiple choice exams?” A lot of hands went up. Again, I just noticed in the room how many hands went up. He said, “okay.” I didn’t think anything more about it. As the semester went on, he would pose questions, you would have the opportunity as a student to, essentially, stand up, respond, debate him. Fine, you know. I did, on more than one occasion. Other students did. I didn’t think anything of it. I came out of the class one day, and this African American professor was standing in the hallway and he said, “you. I want to see you.” I looked around, I said, “okay,” and I walked over. At first, I didn’t know who he was talking about, but then he walked over and said, “you,” and I forget what color I had on, but he said, “you in that color,” and I said, “oh, okay.” So I walked over. He said, “what’s your name?” I said, “Dee Dee Strum.” He said, “I’m Dr. Noel Myricks.” He said, “I’m over at the school of human ecology,” and he said, “I make a point of cruising past some of these classrooms, observing the student make up. The make-up of the classes and whatever.” And he said, “I’ve come back to this one two or three times this semester because of you.” I said, “because of me?” He said, “yeah. You really have taken my interest.” I said, “why?” He said, “I’ll tell you in a moment, but first I have a couple of questions for you.” And I said, “okay.” He said, “are your parents college educated?” I said, “my dad graduated from IU.” He said, “oh, well, you’ve already answered my second question, which was going to be if the answer was yes, which I already expected, had your parents gone to a historically black college or university or a white university? But your dad went to IU Bloomington?” I said, “yeah.” He said, “well, I’m from the Detroit area, I know about IU.” I said, “oh, okay, well, I went there too.” He said, “you went there?” I said, “yeah, as a freshman, but I didn’t stay there, I transferred back here.” He said, “oh, interesting, we’ll have that discussion later. Secondly, you said it’s your dad. Did your mother go to college?” I said, “no, she didn’t.”

And he said, “okay, since you said it was your dad, I’m testing my hypothesis. Was your dad military, by any chance?” I said, “yeah.” He said, “an officer?” I said, “yeah. How’d you know that?” He said, “I want you to come to see me. I’m going to be your advisor.” I said, “pardon me?” He said, “I am going to be your advisor. I’m over at Marie Mount Hall, School of Human Ecology. I want you to come over there to see me.” And he gave me a card, he wrote on the back of it a day and time. I remember that night, talking to my mom, and telling her about this professor, and she said, “oh, well how soon are you going to see him?” And I said, “it’s a day next week, I don’t even know if I’m going to go.” She said, “yes, you’re going to go. If he’s taken an interest in you, you have to go see why he’s interested in talking to you.” I said, “well, okay.” So I went. So at that point, I think the office at the time he had given me was like 30 minutes or 45 minutes. So when I sat down, he said, “whatever your major is, I want you to change it because I want you over here at this school and I want to be your advisor, but I need you to be in the major.” And I said, “what majors are here?” And he said, “family and community development.” Well, isn’t that interesting? I said, “I’m looking for housing and community development, but I haven’t declared a major here yet. I knew that there was something about housing.” He said, “yeah, that’s one of the programs. We have some classes in that or something.” And I said, “well, okay, I have to read about it, but why?” He said, “because I don’t want to lose you. You have a lot of promise. They’ll try to eat you up and spit you out like so many of the minority students that are here. Not that I think they’d be successful eating you up and spitting you out, that’s why I took a particular interest in you.” I said, “well, thank you. But why did you take an interest in me?” He said, “I was there the day your professor asked how many of you preferred essay exams over multiple choice, do you remember that?” I said, “yeah, I do.” He said, “I was standing in the back of the auditorium. Your hand went up and I was looking at the students and whose hands went up. Do you realize you were the only black student whose hand went up for essays?” I said, “no, I didn’t pay any attention, I just remember a lot of hands went up.” He said, “when they asked about multiple choice, every other black

student in your class raised their hand." I said, "oh." He said, "what that told me is that you're very comfortable in gathering your thoughts and writing them out. That's what an essay requires. It also told me, which my suspicious have been, that you were probably raised in a family where somebody had already gone to college. And the kind of conversations and the kind of schools you have gone to raised your confidence in your ability to have a question thrown at you in writing and to develop a written response. That's something that kids who are here from the inner city schools, that's not how they were taught. That's not how they were prepared. That's why they chose multiple choice, because they figure, as long as I can guess, I can probably, most of the time or some of the time, get the right answer." That particular conversation has stayed with me and it's been 45 years, I think, since I've gotten out of College Park. The second part of what he said, though, he said, "the day I decided that I was going to be your advisor was another time I came back and it was because of you I came back to stand in that classroom. I had an opening at the time and I thought, I'm going to go over there to that psychology class." He said, "it happened to be a day where your professor posed a question and you stood up and debated him." And he reminded me what the topic was, which I don't remember now. And I said, "okay." He said, "well, I cruised by that class any number of times. Another time, you answered a question. You stood up and you answered a question. And it wasn't one that gave itself to debate, but that particular time, he came back at you, which is what engaged you in debate with him. I know why he did it. He did it because you're a black student, but you held your own. You didn't have any problem debating him." And he said, "that's when I knew that, more than likely, you came out of a military household. That's why I asked you, was your father military." And I said, "so what does that mean? Why did you surmise that?" And he said, "because your comfort level with other white students and white professors, being the authoritarian structure here, is extremely high. Black kids from these inner city schools who have been brought here under a number of special programs," and he named what the initiatives were, and he said, "they've never sat in a classroom with a white student or had a

white teacher. They won't engage them in debate. They won't volunteer an answer, they're sitting there praying they won't be pointed to and asked to give an answer. You volunteer answers and you will debate." I said, "uh, yeah. I never thought about that." He said, "you're the only black student I've seen. In that classroom has a couple hundred, I've gone through it and I've watched other classes and how they operate. I've only seen one other student. It was a female in another class, in another large classroom, and she too debated the professor. Her father was a military officer. That's what started me thinking, huh. So now, I try to determine in my mind where kids come from, their background or whatever." And he said, "this is a huge university. Too many minority kids are not going to make it through." And he was absolutely right as I found, then, through my sorority life. So I'm glad to have the opportunity to share that, because I have become active in the UMD School of Public Health alumni network. The major that I had, which was family science in undergraduate, and community development, which is now behavioral and community health, over the years, I guess it got moved around. Over 40 some years, it ended up at the School of Public Health. I was actually approached by the dean and assistant dean, through another venue, to look at becoming active with them. And I said, "no, I do want to get engaged with college students, with young women, and with African American women in particular, but I'd already mentally made a comment that now that I'm back home, I'm going to do it through one of the HBCUs in the area." And the assistant dean, Ellie something, said to me, "why does it have to be an HBCU?" I said, "because I recognize now, in retrospect, in a whole different world of ways, the struggles that minority students in general, females in particular, go through in getting through college. I've been very successful in my life, in my careers, and I owe it to someone who took an interest in me and helped me to navigate, so I want to do that with women, in general, but young black women in particular." The dean said, "do you realize that the School of Public Health, almost 80% of our enrollment is female or minority?" I said, "at College Park?" And the dean said, "sure is," and Ellie said, "yep. Mostly female and/or minority. We think you can do the same thing at College Park and satisfy your

personal goal that you could do at an HBCU, and we would love to have you active with us." Subsequently, I agreed to go to a meeting, and then another meeting, and I became active. I did agree, then, to serve on the alumni network as vice president, and when I had to write a little thing for them telling them why I want to do this, I said, "because I owe Dr. Noel Myricks, because he took a particular interest in me and other minority students, those that he could round up." But he was only one person. And it made the difference in terms of the quality of my education. I was going to finish regardless, because I had been prepared from kindergarten to know I was going to go to college, I was going to not quit until I got my master's. Even when I got older, my dad said, "well, don't think you're just getting a four year degree. You need a master's degree or a doctorate." So I had been prepped, Dr. Noel Myricks then recognized because of my comfort level in university, I would have made it. But the quality of my education and the quality of my life would have not been the same had I not had him as my advisor. So I became invested emotionally at that point with the School of Public Health here and trying to make a difference in whatever way I could, as an alumni member. So when Praise asked me, would I participate in this particular project, I said, "oh my god, yes." So I thank you all of the opportunity to tell my story and to again talk about what it was like at that time the difference that Dr. Noel Myricks made in the life of a minority student back then. Because, as I've said, at the School of Public Health, on panels that I've sat on as an alumni member, UMD College Park was not kind to minority students in the 70s. Fast forwarding, I'm the oldest of five. My sister went here, she's the youngest of the five of us, she was here in the 80s, the late 80s. I will say that there was, I think, a cultural shift or some type of shift along the way that I will give College Park credit for. Because I guess, for them, there were a lot of lessons learned as well, because by the time my sister finished school in the mid to late 80s here in College Park and we would talk about it, she didn't have that same experience. She didn't feel the same way that I did. I left College Park glad to be away from here at a number of levels, while I was successful in my college trajectory here at College Park. There were too many others that I saw that weren't and

that did not get the benefit of a Dr. Noel Myricks making that outreach, and so I left here and I did not have warm feelings for College Park. There were many, many attempts over the decades from the office of alumni affairs, AKAs that had graduated here and who knew me, and who became faculty or part of staff at College Park. They would reach out to me and they would want me to financially support College Park's mission, they would want me to become connected in some way, and I would say "absolutely not." I didn't feel warm about College Park. Again, fast forwarding, everything happens by God's hand and God's plan, I'm reconnected and I do feel that this is where God intended for me to be, and he brought Praise Carson into my life through the mentoring program that the School of Public Health started. And I said, "okay, Lord, this is where you intended for me to be able to feel like I am giving back and hopefully can reach others." So when Praise said, "can you do this for my team? There's a group of us that has to do this project." I thought, "oh my god, because that means that I get exposed to other young women." So, like I said, I just wanted the opportunity to talk to young women and to feel like I could hopefully improve the quality of their education experience in some small way, because Dr. Myricks improved the quality of my educational experience at College Park. Without that, I know I would not be on this campus today, talking to you.

M: Before we go any further, how do you spell Dr. Myrick's name?

S: Noel N O E L, and his last name is Myrick M Y R I C K. He's retired now, lives in North Carolina, he was a tenured professor here for a very long time. And I've not been in touch with him in years and years and years, but he is somebody who I will never forget, and I hope that every college professor, every advisor on College Park campus, at some point in their life, made a professional commitment to leave their mark on students in some way, because he certainly left his mark on me.

M: Okay. Just, these are short answer questions. What were your favorite courses, outside of the human ecology college, as well as family sciences? Did you have any, like that psychology class?

S: Yeah, I enjoyed that psychology class. And you're right, I think I just took it as an elective. That's probably the end of the list.

M: And mentioned that when you first transferred in, you were a commuter student, you didn't live here at first.

S: Yes. I did live here, I lived in Summerset Hall, is there a Summerset Hall?

M: Yes.

S: Yes, I lived in Summerset, I do remember that. And I lived in one of the high rise buildings, but I can't remember if it was for a semester or just for a summer, because I do remember going for a summer course because I lost credits. You know, when you transfer schools, you lose credits. So, I want to say La Plata, but it may have been Cambridge. So, yes.

M: So, you lived on campus throughout your time?

S: No. I had an apartment, I know by my senior year and I think my junior year. I think it was only my sophomore year. I may have been a sophomore or junior, because I think I was at Summerset for a whole year. Then I moved off campus.

M: And what about when you had your master's? When you were getting it?

S: I was in my apartment. I had been in my apartment, I know by the time I was a senior, and I stayed in that same apartment all the way through my master's program.

M: You mentioned that you, as part of the agreement with your father when you transferred back to Maryland, you had to work for it. Where did you work?

S: In high school, I had a high school counselor. Again, I was at a majority white high school, they had just integrated public schools in the state of Maryland in 67, 68. Brown versus Board of Education was the Supreme Court ruling for integration of public schools in 1954; it took Maryland and some of the counties until the late sixties. I started high school here in, I want to say, 1967, and when I started as a freshman in high school, I was starting with kids who had always gone to the segregated public school system. Then I transferred, I told you, after my sophomore year, we moved from Anne Arundel County to Howard County, and they had just integrated the public school system in Howard County the year before. So again, I was at a majority white high school, but with minority students that had come from the segregated high school, and they had a black high school counselor there, Mr. Cecil Burton. And again, God's hand, God's plan, there was a group of black students that he really made special outreach to and got us involved in student government association and things like that. Well, he also got us jobs during the summer and after school, and it was with a grocery store chain called Pantry Pride, which is out of business now. So I worked there during high school at Pantry Pride as a cashier. Fast forwarding, I went to IU, came back to UMD, and I got a job at Giant Food in Montgomery County as a cashier, because I'd had that experience as a high school student as a cashier. So, I worked my way through college at College Park, working off campus at Giant Food.

M: Did you do that only as an undergrad, or while getting your master's too?

S: When I was in the master's program, I worked Giant Food, I had a job with a community action program of Howard County, which I was a part-time community organizer, which was in line with my major of family and community development, and I worked with, I had a teaching fellowship, that's how I got through my master's program. I actually was an employee at UMD because I had to teach. As I recall, I taught two undergrad classes and I taught one grad class. I developed the first practicum, which now, they call it internships, that students in that major had to off campus. So I developed that as a graduate student. So, I actually had three jobs when I was working through graduate school. But that advantage was that the teaching fellowship took care of my tuition and fees, I did have to teach in exchange because it was a teaching fellowship, and I did get a small check every two weeks. I got, like, a stipend or something. But I still needed to work to pay rent and other expenses, so I kept my job at Giant Food and I had a job with Howard County community action program.

M: Okay. That's great, I didn't even have to ask half my questions because you were hitting all of it as you were talking. Is there anything else that you want to add about your life, or you mentioned that UMD was not particularly kind to minority students and we talked about the financial aspects, but I feel like there are other things, whether it was professors that weren't kind, white students that weren't kind?

S: White students weren't kind, professors weren't kind. And when I say that, again, having now a different perspective looking in the rearview mirror, it wasn't necessarily that they were unkind to me, because I'm a person that it's hard to be unkind to. Because it's—I'm a women's empowerment advocate and I see it very akin to the victimization of women, is that men who victimize women do so with women that they can do it to. They're usually women that are isolated, don't necessarily have a strong support system, don't have a lot of confidence, and so you terrorize and you victimize people you can be victimized. I was never raised to be a victim.

My father used to always tell my sisters and I, “I’m not raising girls to be victims. You will go to college.” And I want to add this, something else that we used to talk about in our household, and I guess because it was my dad’s experience and perspective, he would say, “in white families, they always commit to sending their boys to college because they say they have to be the head of the household and they have to support their families.” He would tell my brothers, “I will help you go through your first year of college. Everybody here that wants to go to college will get their first year on me. If you want it bad enough after that, you’ll figure out how to pay for it. But I will make sure that your sisters get through college, because I will not have them under somebody’s them and feeling like they’re in a bad situation that they can’t get out of, that they have to stay in a bad marriage because they can’t support themselves or their children.” He said, “you all can drive trucks, you can dig ditches, you can go in the military. Men have many more options in this world than women do. But with an education, your sisters will have options.” So, again, my sister and I always understood we were going to go to college, we were going to be able to take care of ourselves. If we were married and it was a bad situation, we would be able to say, “I’m not taking this, I’m out of here.” Again, as an adult, and having conversations with parents years later about this, about that conversation when we were younger, I said to my mother, “I’m really glad that daddy had that commitment and you also said, yes, the girls have to go to college. Is it because you had so many friends that were in bad marriages that couldn’t walk away from them?” And I started naming some of her friends because I remember them coming over and they would say to my mom, “I wish I had a husband like yours, I wish mine was better,” and my mother would say, “well, don’t take that abuse, you need to leave.” And they would say, “but I can’t. I don’t have a college degree, I can’t take care of myself and my kids. He’s the one with the college degree, he’s the military officer, he’s got the benefits and the income, I don’t.” And they stayed in bad situations. So my mother said to me, “I would say that’s a large part of what drove your dad to say you girls would go to college even if nobody else does.” So, now, parallel to that, when I say College Park was unkind, they weren’t necessarily

unkind to me, because I'm not the kind of person, I'm not the kind of female you can be unkind to. If you push, I'm going to push back. But what I witnessed was the helplessness of other minority students, and females both black and white, who didn't know how to push back, but they never should've been pushed in the first place. This should've been a place that helped you, as opposed to pushing you and pushing you out. And so I, and again just given who I was and my major, which was community development, community empowerment, okay. I resented what I was seeing. And I will again say, though, everything has its purpose. It made me even more committed to empowering families of low income, families with a single female head of household, and women in general. And that became part of my, that became my profession and part of my person mission was to help others and particularly women, just feel a sense of confidence and empowerment. I tell everybody, my household, our family was full of love and self-esteem and confidence. My mother was the one who, along with my dad, ensured that, I have a niece that says, "one thing you Strums aren't short of is confidence and self-esteem, you got enough of it to package and sell." And it's true, but that really is the difference between those who succeed and those who don't—it's whether or not you came up believing that you could do anything that you wanted to do. I started my own business when I was 28 years old. And people could not believe that I would quit a quote, good job to start a business at the age of 28. And in a field where women weren't doing it A, and B, particularly not a black woman. I never thought much about the fact that I was a woman or black. It was other people pointing it out to me and saying, "how can you do that? How can you just walk away from a good job? I mean, you're a black woman." And I'd say, "okay…" They'd say, "well, you're not going to be able to do that," and I'd say, "why not?" And they'd look at me and say, "well, because they're not going to let you." Who's not going to let me? I had no concept that somebody had to let me do anything. And I spent my lifetime thanking my parents for raising us in a manner that it would never even occur to us that we had to think about somebody letting us do something. It was whatever we decided to do, we could figure out how to do it. And if we could figure out how to

do it, then we'd be successful at it. And that's what I did. So, I never worked for anybody else again, after I was 28 years old. I started my business and I did it for 37 years. The only reason I left business operation and ownership was because my parents were elderly, my dad was dying, my mother was going to kill herself being in her 80s and trying to take care of her husband who was 88 with dementia. I would come here and visit as often as I could, try to help, but I would leave crying, because I knew that she couldn't do it. She could not do it. So, at any rate, my goal professionally and personally, and it's all one in the same, is every woman I come in contact with, I try to immediately figure out or size up, is this a woman who needs encouragement, a kind word, does she need someone to say "I believe in you and you should believe in yourself," send me an email, call me, if there's something I can share with you, I'd be glad to do that, because too many of us are adults and still trying to gain our footing, as opposed to having the advantage of coming in to adulthood with footing and confidence and self-esteem.

M: Thank you so much for taking time out of your day and coming out here to talk to us, I know I sure learned a lot. Thank you so much.

S: Okay! I'd be interested in seeing how you boil that down into 15 minutes.