

Oral History of Javette Laremont '80

Oral history conducted in the Barbara Anton's office at the Pembroke Women's Center. The interviewer was Derria Monique Byrd '96.

Derria Byrd: Derria Byrd interviewing Javette Laremont - November 5, 1994. What were your life experiences that lead to your coming to Brown?

Javette Laremont: I would say that one of the major reasons I think I ended up at Brown was because I had had sort of a background of very high academic achievement. And I was determined to try to go to the best institution that I could go to when I graduated from high school. At the time, Brown didn't really mean anything to me. It wasn't a well-known university among my circle of friends so as I started to apply to other Ivy League institutions, I came across some information on Brown but I think the pivotal point in my decision was when an admissions officer came to our high school and then we started to talk about Brown. And mentioned some of the people that had gone to my high school that were currently at Brown. And that's what really led me to concentrate on information about Brown and actually come here to visit Brown.

DB: So where are you from and what your high school public or private?

JL: My high school was public high school. I am from New York. I went to the Bronx High School of Science.

DB: There is this big controversy now about whether Brown goes to private - is recruiting - from like private or public schools. And now it's mostly private schools that they go visit. (JL: Hmmm.) It's a big controversy now. How many colleges did you apply to?

JL: I think I applied to between eight and ten colleges at the time.

DB: Were most of them Ivy League schools?

JL: I would say the bulk of them were Ivy League schools. I also applied to some schools in the New York area thinking that I might want to stay closer to home.

DB: So you said that you had a history of high education in your family. Both of your parents were...

JL: No, I said personal high academic achievement (DB: Oh, okay.) but not - neither parent ever attended college. High school was the highest level of education in my family.

DB: So was it your own initiative to go on to college or is that what your parents wanted as well?

JL: It was my own initiative. I mean I really enjoyed school and I really enjoyed academics. I did really well - I was always like a valedictorian or salutatorian you know in all of the lower grades. And once I went to the Bronx High School of Science and that school has an 80% rate of people going on to college and higher learning. So it just seemed natural to continue to go forward.

DB: What were your expectations coming to Brown?

JL: I don't know that I had expectations. I expected that I was going to get a solid education. I think my expectations were that I would get a good education but I would have a good social experience too because that was what I was looking for - to have a social life.

DB: How was your high school dissimilar or similar to Brown?

JL: In terms of actual size, my high school was very similar to Brown. There were five thousand students in my high school and there were five to six thousand students at Brown at the time. So size was really an important factor. I felt comfortable in that size institution. I also liked being sort of a leader and an activist and I knew that I had been able to achieve a leadership role at my high school so I figured I could do the same at a similar sized institution. In terms of ethnic background, my high school was probably more Jewish and Asian than Brown was when I came here. I think Brown probably had more of a white Anglo-Saxon make-up than it had a Jewish or an Asian constituency at the time that I attended Brown.

DB: What were the things that you remember most fondly about your time at Brown?

JL: I think the things that I remember the most are that I did have a lot of fun. I remember my friends. I remember the relationships I developed with

my professors. I just remember the feeling of community that I had when I was here.

DB: What were some of the low points?

JL: The low points? I think there was some disappointment. I was in sports and I was on the varsity volleyball team. I think it was disappointing because I experienced some bad and it ultimately came out that they were racial problems but I never was really accepted as a full member of that team. More from the coach. I think the other players accepted me as a good player. But, the coach - no. Who only used me if it was politically correct use me. And she didn't really use me that much so and I think I was really disappointed because that was one of the things that I really wanted to pursue. I wanted to have an academic experience as well as an athletic experience and a social experience.

DB: Was that the other sphere of your education in which you felt the racial tension?

JL: Um. (pause) Probably as blatant. I mean the other times were more kind of out of people's ignorance. I was a resident counselor the whole time after my freshman year. And so I would have majority students as my counselees and I mean there would be some stupidity on the part of the students never having had contact with African American students. You know, they'd say some stupid things. But once they were corrected, they never said those things again and then you moved on. (DB: Right.) In terms of professors, I think for the most part the professors treated you with respect if you worked hard and achieved academically. I mean I'm not saying that they were my best buds (DB laughs) but we did okay.

DB: Where did you live while you were at Brown?

JL: I always lived on Pembroke campus. I started out in Champlin. I lived in Wooley and then I was a counselor in Andrews.

DB: How was the "dating scene" - the social life?

JL: Yea...(laughs) fun. (DB & JL laugh) It was very active when I was here. I think because at the...I was here at the height of sort of the black experience at Brown. I mean there...in my class we had over a hundred black students. And in the other classes there were more than a hundred. So you know at

any point in time, there were 400 to 500 blacks on campus. And you know. Everybody was excited to see everybody so dating was fun actually.

DB: What class were you in?

JL: The class of '80.

DB: Did they still have the Transitional Summer Program when you came here? (JL: [yes].) Did you go to that?

JL: No, I did not. I think we were one of the first classes to go through that program. And I don't really know what the selection criteria was for that program. But I wasn't selected to participate in that so...It was interesting to come on campus and see the people that had been in the program and not being part of the program. People had already formed their little clicks. But within a couple weeks everybody just kind of blended together so it really didn't make that much of a difference.

DB: What clubs or organizations did you participate in?

JL: Umm. The resident counseling program. The pre-law society. The volleyball team. I played collegiate basket...I mean intercollegiate basketball, not as a varsity team. Umm...I'm trying to think. Onyx. I was also a senior class officer. OUAP. Rites and Reasons.

DB: You were all over the place. (laughs) (JL: Yea. (laughs)) Did you work while you went to Brown?

JL: Yea I worked part time. I was a full financial aid student. So I had...you had to have work-study in your package.

DB: Where did you work. Was it on campus or...

JL: Yea actually I had some pretty decent jobs. I never had to work in the cafeteria or anything. I worked at the college venture program which I don't even know if it exists now. But it was a program geared toward people that wanted time off. (DB: Right.) Yea I actually was part of the founders. One of the founders of that program. We found the jobs and everything. That was really a great time. I did that for two years. I also worked in the library. And I also worked with a professor - doing archival work. So that was my work study situation.

DB: Much better than a dining hall. (JL: Yea. Really.) How were your strongest friendships developed here?

JL: I think that the strongest friendships really probably came from the fact that we were either from the same geography - you know like New York. So you go together with your New York friends. I actually came here with one of my girlfriends from high school. So we were roommates and then you know we kind of extended our friends from there. But the nice thing is the people that I met like that first week that I was in school are still my best friends now. And we get together at least once a year. So it's pretty cool. You know I have great friends. And we still think we're like in our teens (DB laughs) which is kind of scary. (JL & DB laugh)

DB: Socially would you say you interacted with people from the same racial like religious backgrounds or where you kind of all over the place?

JL: Umm. I wouldn't say we were all over the place. I mean socially pretty much we hung with kind of a Third World crowd. I say a Third World crowd for myself because there weren't that many Latin American students on campus but I was like the one person who had a Latin American boyfriend. So (laughs) from that point of view I hung out with a Latin American crowd. And also in an African American crowd and a lot of my friends were Asian American. But I think that was because I had come from a high school where those groups kind of always interacted and always had a lot of solidarity. So that is what I did. From a another view point - economically everybody was at a much higher economic level than I was. So at first I felt a little bit put off by that. Because I came from the inner city, I came from the projects and...I realized that these people didn't see that as a barrier to being friends. They were real people. And so it all worked out fine.

DB: As far as being an African American woman - do you think that you had a different experience at Brown than someone of another race or gender would have had?

JL: Well I'm sure...I'm sure my experience was unique. For me it was unique because when I was here I tried to embrace the fact that I was African American. So my discipline was...what I ended up getting my degree in was English but I really focused on African American writers - the African American experience- I tried to get to know most of the professors on campus that were African American or African - Anani (laughs). (DB laughs) So I

really...that was the experience I wanted and that was why I chose Brown over some of the other schools because I knew that these individuals were here and I could reach out to them and hopefully they would reciprocate.

DB: How were student relations on campus versus off campus as far as relations between colleges and different communities such as the black community here with the black community at Johnson and Wales or RISD?

JL: Oh okay. Yea that's interesting. (pause) We didn't have that much contact with students from Johnson and Wales. I mean RISD, yea. A lot just a lot of the crowd were kind of like artsy kind of people so they tended to hang out with a lot of kids from RISD. And we would have joint parties together. But you know when it came to kids from PC or URI or whatever - you know we were never really cool with kids from those schools. You know we were pretty sheltered here and we never really thought about the kids from Johnson and Wales unless they just came to the parties but...the scene...there was very limited off campus interaction with other schools. Now there was a lot of off campus interaction with the black community.

DB: Oh, as far as like the Providence community?

JL: Yea as far as the Providence community. I mean...actually one of my actual work study experiences was off campus working in South Providence with the Black Heritage Society. And I did research on the black church in Rhode Island in the early 1800s. So I had to go into all the churches and read through their logs - their church logs - and talk to the older people in the community. And that was really a nice experience. And we did a lot of programs to outreach to the black community in Rhode Island. So I felt that the black community and the black community in Providence - we had sort of a nice relationship going which was very difference from what Brown's relationship with them was.

DB: In and out of the classroom, how were relations between black men and women on campus?

JL: They were pretty good. I mean it was because there was the sense of you know we're in this struggle together. You know we didn't get here by chance and we can't stay here by chance. So that if people were having trouble we would talk to each other. We tried to treat each other with respect and help each other as much as we can. I mean it wasn't always successful but we tried.

DB: When I was speaking to Anita Spivey last week she said the thing that shocks her the most was how it seems the relationship between black men and women has seemed to change on campus and she just doesn't understand that at all.

JL: Yea, I don't understand it either. I mean you know I think it's just because relationships in general have just changed so much but...Part of the experience at Brown and you can ask anyone in our classes and we could name all the guys we thought were like really fine. (JL & DB laugh) For real and then if you liked each other you dated? (JL & DB laugh) Dating was part of our experience and now it's it's sad because I know I just hear from the women that you know the men here aren't happening. There's very little interaction and if there is interaction, it's not really built around respect. And you know just it's sad. It's a very different experience. We had this one situation...I can remember when I was a senior and I guess we thought we were like wise old people (DB laughs) that could guide the freshman. And the freshman men were trashing some of the freshman women and talking about them really bad. And I remember we got the senior men to take the freshman men and sit 'em down and have this like rap group and talk about this stuff. But you know I don't know what that was all about. I mean I think it was just more we felt like they should be treating these women better and they weren't. So I don't know if it was effective (DB laughs) but we felt morally obligated to make sure that these freshman men knew that they couldn't go around treating people like this. So it was definitely very different.

DB: What do you think Brown tried to or taught you about the role of
w o m e n i n s o c i e t y ?

JL: Um I think what I learned was that...because at the time Brown was trying to recruit more and more women professors. And so I was seeing more and more women in leadership roles. So I think that what I got out of the experience...because I think the next class of women were a half and half class - half women and half men. I just I felt like women could do anything they wanted to do as long as they were prepared. I mean I still knew that even in this society that was dominated by men and men sort of set the rules of the game but that if women could learn those rules they probably could play the game even better. And that was part of my experience here. It was just to try and be a leader even if it was originally designated a male kind of role. Which if there was something that I wanted, I would just go after it and do it.

DB: When you said it was 50/50 men and women, is that just in the Brown all together or just in the black community?

JL: No. Brown altogether.

DB: Cause it's 7:1 in the black community (JL: Yea.) now - women to men. (JL: Yes. I know.) Was it the same then or...?

JL: I think it was pretty even in the black community at that time. You know we always felt there weren't enough black men (DB laughs) but I think that was just more like the ones that we wanted to date. (JL & DB laugh) I think when you did a physical count, it was pretty even. Maybe it was like 60 women and 40 men or something along those lines.

DB: How big an issue was financial aid?

JL: It was a big issue. It was a big issue for me personally because even at the time when I came here the tuition was ridiculously low in comparison to what it is now. It was 2/3 of what my mother's annual income was. And so for me to make that decision when I could have gone to the state university and not have the kind of considerations...I wouldn't have had to work and all this other stuff. It was a big issue. I mean I can remember there would be times when I couldn't buy books and I just would have to go to my professors and say, "Look, I can't buy books for the class." And they would just let me borrow their copies of books. So you know, it was real. And it's got to be harder now...And it's got to be more difficult today then it was when I was here.

DB: By the time I graduate it's supposed to be \$30,000 a year. (JL: Yea, it's just ridiculous) Who or what were your support networks while you were here?

JL: The support networks were weak at best. I mean we had the minority peer counselor program as freshman. I mean but all of the support was geared towards when we were freshman. So you got all of this hand holding and sense of security when you were a freshman and when you became a sophomore you got this rude awakening that you were on your own and that there was no lifeline so to speak. But the good thing is that we had some good administrators. We had professors who were willing to kind of serve as role models and help you through some difficult situations and friends. I mean you had to go to upperclass people and you know just say, "Look, I'm having a hard time. Can you help me? You know what should I do?"

Whatever the role. And then we had Ferd Jones who was a psychologist - I think he was a psychologist. But I mean you could talk to him on a one-to-one basis. And then at the time that I was here, we had two black chaplains which was really nice because even if religiously you weren't really active religiously, you still felt like you could go to someone and talk to them in confidence about whatever was troubling you.

DB: What social or political issues were big on campus at the time?

JL: I mean it's a never ending saga. I mean the big issues were: financial aid, making sure that Brown was committed to maintaining diversity, apartheid...you know we were...Brown's whole position in terms of its divestment from South Africa were really really big at the time. And I think really more of a sense of making sure that if you brought us here to the university but are we really participating as key members of policy making in the course of the development of the institution. So we really...our class really rallied around making sure that we were part of the senior class officer structure - that we were in UCS? (DB: Umm Hmm.) And you know that we weren't just focused on just like the Third World Center and OUAP. That we really had some clout outside of our own community.

DB: Do you think that majority students were also rallying for issues that most directly affected the minority students such as the diversity in the community...

JL: Well, it was I would say maybe 20% of them. You know. I didn't get the sense that it was like a university-wide issue. Because at the time and you know it could be all my perception but at the time most of the financial aid students probably were people of color as opposed to the majority students. So you know if we were rallying around financial aid, you know they were kind of like, "Well that's not really an issue for me." But...because that was that was the roaring '80s where money is flowing, their parents were workin' and on Wall Street making big bucks. And so you know they weren't feeling the pinch yet. You know?

DB: Was there an "African Sun" while you were here?

JL: Yes.

DB: Was that a...it's not really used as much as it should be now. Like was it a big source of communication between the community?

JL: What it was it was an outlet for expression for people. And we had a lot of people who were good artists, good writers and it just gave them another forum to express themselves. I mean I don't think it was sort of our tribal drum that you know (DB laughs) coming out in the "African Sun" like let's get together. (JL & DB laugh) I mean so if we wanted a call to action I mean basically it was word of mouth. We used the Third World Center to get together and organize so we didn't really have a written vehicle that was where everybody got the news.

DB: Were there tensions between the black community and the Brown Daily Herald?

JL: Yea but it wasn't always organized. I mean it was it would always be sort of how they would represent some of the causes and some of the rallies that we would participate in. And then we would like have meetings with the heads of the Brown Daily Herald and say, "You know, you didn't get the story right. You misrepresented us." And so forth. But again that was part of the struggle we felt that we couldn't...nothing would really change at the Brown Daily Herald unless somebody from our group was on the Brown Daily Herald. So we realize that you couldn't expect the majority group to have any sensitivity to your issues if you weren't active as a leader in that group. So our goal would be to get someone on that board; get someone to be an editor.

DB: How active was OUAP on campus?

JL: It was very active. It was very active because we were the class...we were the class that came in because of the '75 take-over and OUAP came out of that whole experience so. It was still alive. There was still a lot of in-fighting. You know it wasn't like the whole black community embraced OUAP. It became very revolutionary and then there was sort of a more of a moderate group that had issues that were on their mind. And then the group of blacks who said, "I don't want to be bothered with any of it." So you always still had you know...it only represented a small portion of the population.

DB: Where there any courses on black issues? Like how strong was the Af Am Study department?

JL: Yea that was probably the height of the Afro Am Study department. And then I guess by the time I was graduating, it sort of declined. And then when

we came here there were professors on campus that taught black...African music. There were African dance classes. We had George Bass here so Rites and Reasons was really at its strongest point. So there was just a lot that a black student could choose from. A lot of things which would really pique their interests whether it was you know academic or artistic. So...there was a lot for us...There was also a sprinkling of black issues in other disciplines like sociology, anthropology, history, am civ, semiotics. But it wasn't you know...it wasn't a broad...you didn't get this broad sense that black issues were part of these disciplines and all that kind of stuff. Most of the black professors were in the English department at that time. I think there were five.

DB: Yea, the Afro Am department offers about three courses a semester right now.

JL: Yea that's very different from...when I was here I mean you could take at least twenty to twenty-five courses in Af Am.

DB: How were your classroom experiences? (JL: Relative to?) Your interactions with other students, with the professors...

JL: They were all pretty good. I mean it's hard because it really depends on your discipline. I mean I was in English. And the English classes tend to be small - more seminar driven. So if you know you're in a class of ten to twelve students maximum, so you are forced to have sort of a civil interactions with your classmates just because you are really in such a small environment. Most of the classes were very good experiences. I can't remember any bad academic experiences. If they were that bad, I probably blocked them out. (laughs) But I...I just don't recall any that were really that bad.

DB: Was there...was interracial dating an issue while you were here?

JL: It wasn't (pause) it wasn't widely done. But there was certainly people that were in our class that were of mixed race that you know would choose to either date white or black or whatever. I mean and we just accepted that. But we accepted that because they were of mixed race, so we figured, okay fine, they can do what they want to do. I mean I guess I was an interracial dater because I dated a you know a Mexican American guy but I don't think people were like (pause) antagonistic about interracial dating. I think it depended on the individual. If they felt like this person was "truly black" and dated they could accept that. If they felt that the person had never hung out in the black

community and dated outside of the black community, I guess they just kind of wrote them off. So that was the situation with that.

DB: That's kind of the same way it is now. Do...When you think about your Brown degree and your experiences at Brown, do you feel like you achieved something that wasn't initially meant for you? In the sense that like Brown is a white institution and thus is mostly geared toward white students.

JL: No, I never felt...I mean I...I mean I certainly felt like the Brown experience was richer than I ever thought it would be and...but I never felt like it wasn't something that was I deserved or that I worked hard for.

DB: What do you think was missing from your education?

JL: For me, I think the only thing that I regret is not having taken advantage of an international experience. And I just felt like I was so involved in being here that I never really got out of here to kind of get another experience. But I think at the time and I know at the time, as a financial aid student, if you went abroad you weren't guaranteed your financial aid when you returned. So that was real. That was a real issue. And I...there was no way I could jeopardize (DB: Right.) my financial aid to go off to Africa or wherever I would have wanted to go.

DB: After graduation, how do you feel your classroom experiences benefitted you?

JL: A lot of the benefit comes from the fact that I was at Brown, I am encouraged to look at an issue from many different sides, to be very independent, and have formalized rational thought around issues. And all of that has been very helpful. Also because of the leadership experiences I had at Brown, I was good working with a lot of different kind of people and trying to get them to work as a community and come to some consensus. So all that has turned out to be very valuable to me.

DB: So when you graduated, what were you intending to do with your English degree?

JL: laughs. At the time, I thought I wanted to be an attorney so I thought I was going to go on to law school and become an attorney and be a judge, I guess at the time. I had clerked for a judge in the summer so I just knew I was going to be a judge.

DB: So what happened after graduation?

JL: A lot of things. There were a lot of personal things that had happened. I just felt really burnt out after graduation and said I'm gonna take a year off and really think about whether or not law is the decision for me. So in the meantime I had to get a job and I ultimately (laughs) accepted a job that became my career.

DB: What did you do?

JL: I accepted a job at IBM in marketing here in Providence. So I went back home to New York and then I worked for a summer teaching English as a second language. And then I came back to Providence and worked at IBM marketing computers and market planning and strategy and stayed there for 13 years. And now I work as a vice-president at an investment management firm.

DB: Well, that's basically the bulk of the questions. Is there anything else you would to talk about?

JL: No, thank you.

DB: Okay, well thank you.