Transcript – Delores A. Bennett, class of 1997

Narrator: Delores A. Bennett
Interviewer: Mary Murphy
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Track 1

Mary Murphy: [00:00:00] Okay, so my name is Mary Murphy and we are recording another Brown Women Speak oral history interview today on Monday, Dec. 11, and I'm in Southbury, Connecticut, today with a Brown University alumnae – Dec. 10th. Thank you.

So, as we begin, this is our leftover or final interview that came in as part of the Brown University All Class Black Alumni Reunion in response to requests or interests to donate an interview around that event. So now I'm going to ask my interviewee to introduce herself and we'll go from there.

Delores Bennett: Good afternoon. Delores Rochester, Delores Bennett Rochester, class of 1997. I have a bachelor's of science in chemical engineering [00:01:00] from Brown University and spent four years there before leaving and going to work full-time at IBM.

MM: Okay, so Delores, I'm going to ask you to just speak up a little bit so that the audio recording will catch it … I know.

DB: (laughter) Okay, that's going to be a little challenge. That means I need to be like this?

MM: Yes, just lean right on over.

DB: Okay.

MM: So, what I like to do with all of these interviews is just back up. First, we want to know and the listeners want to know a little bit about your family background, and personal history, before

your run-up and your connection to Brown University. So, if you could just share with us about that.

DB: Absolutely. I came to this country when I was 13 years old. So my parents moved here because they wanted to really afford us – myself, my siblings – the opportunity to have more options and more opportunities available to us. So, when I came, I came from an all-girls Catholic school – convent school [00:02:00] if you will – and attended Hartford Public High School, which was a huge adjustment for me. You can imagine wearing a uniform and being at an all-girls school and then going to a co-ed public-school setting. That was a huge culture shock.

MM: Where were you?

DB: I was originally from Jamaica. So, I moved from Jamaica in '89. We moved to Hartford in the dead of the winter, in October – couldn't have picked a better time to move, I guess – and then started public school. For us, both of my parents are blue-collar workers, so for them, this education was the key to unlocking opportunities for us. So, we moved here. I started at high school – very much diverse environment. When we first started, they weren't really sure where to put me because when you're in Jamaica you're under a British education system and you start high school at 11. There is no differentiation between a junior high [00:03:00] or middle school. You go straight from primary school to high school and you have to take a common entrance examination to place into your high school, so you can't just go to any high school that you want to.

MM: That's right.

DB: So, at that point, I had already completed three years of high school. I was entering my fourth year of high school. So when I came here, they really didn't know what to do with me and they placed me initially into what they quote-unquote called "remedial classes" and they realized within a week that I wasn't supposed to be there so they then moved me into what they called "mainstream classes," and they were like, "She really doesn't belong here," so then they put me

in honors classes, which is where I stayed for the rest of my high-school career. The other thing is too they put me a year back, they put me back in ninth grade because of my age and when my birthday was, less the fact that I had already completed three years of high school [00:04:00] at that point –

MM: And when were you born?

DB: December 27th.

MM: Okay, in 1970 …

DB: … 4. So, they put me back and they put me in these different classes. Eventually they got it right. So, I graduated at the top of my class and at the time I was looking at schools, I applied to UConn, Yale, Georgetown, MIT, and I remember my teacher at the time, Judy [Saffron?], she was my geography teacher, and there was an informational session for Brown University in Connecticut. I can't remember exactly where it was – I want to say like in Trumbull or somewhere there – and she had taken such an interest in me when I first came here that she almost became a mother mentor to me as my teacher, and she said to me, she was like, you know, "Do you want to go to this information?" and I was like, "Sure." Didn't know anything about the school, and I said, "Sure, I'll go." I sat there and I'm listening, and I'm like, "Oh this sounds like a [00:05:00] pretty interesting school." And then they ask you, "Do you know of anybody who has ever attended Brown University?" I looked at her and, "I don't know anyone." She was like, "Yes you do." And I said, "I do?" She said, "I did." And I said, "Oh, really!" I applied, which was fantastic. At that point I had gotten – This was regular admissions, so I didn't apply early or anything like that.

MM: And did you apply for any of those other schools you were looking at?

DB: I applied to all of them. I applied to all of them. And I got into all of them with the exception of Georgetown. I still am a little salty about that (laughter). I tell my husband all the time, I was like, "What's going on with that? Everybody else accepted me. What's wrong with –

why are their standards different?" I got into every school except Georgetown, and what was great was I also got into UConn with a full scholarship and my parents were like, "Are you going to UConn?" And I didn't. But I also got the Pembroke Scholarship from Brown University, so I'm a Pembroke scholar –

MM: That is so cool –

DB: – which was awesome because it paid for [00:06:00] 10,000 dollars a year for four years of my college education which, when you're dealing with parents like mine – they didn't have the resources to really afford me going to school, so for me it was a matter of scholarships and/or loans, so to have $10,000 that I didn't have to pay that I got while I was in high school before I graduated, that was phenomenal. So, I'm a Pembroke scholar which was …

MM: Okay, so this is now 1990...

DB: ... 3.

MM: 1993.

DB: Yes.

MM: Okay, so Pembroke would have totally merged about 22 years previous to you getting this scholarship.

DB: That's correct.

MM: That's sort of interesting. So, now, you did this whole application process. Did you ever visit any of the campuses?

DB: I did not. We didn't have the resources to do it. I mean, aside from UConn, which is here. I didn't have the chance to visit any of my schools. So, I went to visit Brown after I got accepted

and I just kind of walked the campus, and I was like [00:07:00], "Oooh, this looks good," and I hadn't decided I was going there yet. That was after the fact.

MM: Did you go with your parents to visit?

DB: I actually went with my teacher.

MM: Oh. OK. Cool.

DB: So she took me. She took me. And we kind of walked the campus but I hadn't decided yet and then I got the scholarship and I was like, "This is fantastic," right? And I halfway didn't really want to go to school in state, I wanted to be away for school and this was a way for me to be away but not be too far.

MM: Can I ask a question just backing up about your parents and what they did for a living once they got here –

DB: Absolutely.

MM: – and if you have any siblings?

DB: I do. I have two siblings, both of whom are older, so I'm the youngest of three. I'm nine years younger than my older sibling. So my sister at the time and brother – they're in Europe – they were in Jamaica at the time because when you come to this country, you are able to come when your parents file, you are able to come if you are under age [00:08:00], and at the time I was under age but my siblings weren't. They were considered adults. So, you have to file papers for them as adults, so they came several years later.

MM: Oh. OK. OK.

DB: Yeah. It was almost like going from being the youngest of three to being a single child, which is a little bit of an adjustment because you don't know anybody here, you really are in a new environment, you don't really know the school system, everything is different, the culture is different –

MM: And your parents are trying to get their footing.

DB: Exactly. And my dad worked in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, for several years, so when we first came, he was still in Guantanamo Bay. Years and years and years before, when I was much younger, my dad was part of a trade agreement where you could go to another country and you could work in a trade and he was one of the guys who did like trade in electrician. So, he would climb the light poles and do all the work, so that's what he was doing on the naval base in Guantanamo Bay.

MM: Oh, wow.

DB: And then my mom when we first [00:09:00] moved here, she became a nutritionist so she used to run like a factory – she would be a manager at a factory in Jamaica and when she came here, she started to be a nutritionist and she moved from that and she worked at a hotel for a while and then she moved from that and then she worked as part of a convalescent home in their dietitian's area, so that's where she worked until she retired. And my dad, when he first came here, he worked in the janitorial services, then he worked different jobs for a while. He worked at a Honda dealership doing janitorial work, and most recently now he's driving a school bus.

MM: Oh. OK. Great.

DB: So, you know, that's kind of what – They've always been very hard-working people, always make sure that we have what we needed, but for us they always stressed the importance of education being a way to change the terrain, if you will, for yourself and being able to make for a better life.

MM: So, when you got the acceptance letters, what did they think? Do you remember getting the first one? [00:10:00]

DB: I remember getting the first big packet (laughter).

MM: Yeah, the thicker ones – the good ones.

DB: I think my father was disappointed that I didn't go to UConn. He was pretty upset with me for quite some time, and my mom was like, "Go where you want, we'll figure it out." I knew that it was really going to be me figuring it out because even with the financial aid, I had to figure out how to complete those documentation, and my teacher that I mentioned to you before, she was instrumental. She was really guiding me along the whole way.

MM: The whole way.

DB: I mean, I would have had to figure it out one way or another but she really was a great guide for me throughout that process and my parents weren't.

MM: And what did she teach you again?

DB: Geography.

MM: Geography, Okay. So, did she mentor other students or did you just hit it off with her?

DB: No, I think what was really different for her was I remember being in her class and it was very obvious, it was very strange. When you are in Jamaica and you are speaking to a teacher [00:11:00], you have to stand up –

MM: Very formal.

DB: – and you have to say ma'am or sir and you have to answer your question or ask your question. So let's just say you move from an all-girls' convent school (laughs) in that environment and you go to a public school and you're standing up to ask or answer a question and you're saying ma'am or sir, you do realize the looks and the stares (laughter) that you're getting because it's like, "What is wrong with her? She's so strange." But for her, she just loved it. She just thought it was such a sign of respect and so different from all the other kids that she was dealing with, in addition to the fact that she was the first one that was like, "She doesn't belong in these classes." So, she really advocated in the background – I didn't even realize she was doing it – to be able to make sure I moved into the right academic stream. She also got me my first part-time job, which ended up being my job that I had throughout the summers and throughout after school working at a credit union, which was a teachers' credit union [00:12:00], so I was there, I was a teller for about a good four years, because you know, she just – and that's where she banked, so she was like, "Well I have a bright student, I want…" She became, when I say mother mentor, that's what she really was to me.

MM: Yeah, a fairy godmother.

DB: Yes, that's just what she was to me. When my parents bought the home they're currently in, she was the one that helped them walked through the mortgage process and helped them navigate that and said the place, look at the house. So, it was like having an angel that – and didn't want anything in return. Sometimes people are looking to get something in return but never was the case.

MM: And what's her name one more time?

DB: Judy [Saffron?].

MM: It's good to get Judy's name on the record. That's cool.

DB: When she passed away –

MM: How long ago did she pass away?

DB: She passed away maybe seven years ago. It was a very difficult time for me. She has two biological children [00:13:00], a son and daughter, and she has an adopted son who is Vietnamese and then me (laughs). So [they're blacked out?] and when Allison call me, she was like, "I have something to tell you about mom."

MM: Oh really. So, it really was familial.

DB: Yeah. It was difficult for me, because I felt like there was a period of time, when I'm like, "I need to call her, I need to call her," and I kept forgetting to do it and then by the time I remembered it was too late, so I've never forgotten that.

MM: It's really special to get a bit of her story on the record.

DB: Yeah, she's an amazing very selfless person and really loved being an educator, just truly loved it, and would love students who loved learning and wanted to be better. If she saw that, she would invest. That's just who she was as a person. I was just special [00:14:00] (laughs). You know, I was very fortunate that way.

MM: So, as you begin your story with Brown University, so you take the leap and you say, "I'm not going to do UConn, I'm actually going to dive in," and choose Brown. And you came to visit – you went to visit with your teacher. And do you remember that visit at all? Do you have any –

DB: I don't, but what I do remember is – and I think it's been renamed – we had a Third Word Transition Program –

MM: Yes, it was called the Third World Center. A lot of our interviewees speak about it a lot.

DB: Yes, so I came, it was like a week before school actually started and I remember spending a week there and we were just going through different team-building, leadership, and it was the

best acclimation I could have had. The good thing is too, to be honest with you, I met a lot of my friends there because being an engineer, [00:15:00] you're [embarrassed and highly?] forever, so you barely get to socialize with anybody (laughter) so this was a good time for me to really build some relationships before you even got on campus, so that was great. And one of my mentors, Adrian Forbes, he was about 6'4" and just awesome, was there with me throughout, and just always an awesome person to talk with. He was pre-med at the time.

MM: So, he was an older student.

DB: He was an older student, because they had students being mentors.

MM: – student mentors.

DB: Exactly. And it was just a great program. I enjoyed it because it just allowed me to foster some relationships with folks that I wouldn't have normally. It created an environment that I think allowed for people to really be themself without the pressures of academia. At the time, I think what it allowed me to do was also acclimate to a place that I never spent any time there really, so this was my kind of introduction to the place that I was going to spend the next four years.

MM: What did you think about the [00:16:00] environment? Just the building. Any snapshots for me?

DB: We were on the Pembroke campus. We had this big open room. I just remember these – like where we all met as a group and then it was attached to the dorm area and then we'd come out in the middle and we would all have like social intera– it was very quaint. It was kind of a cozy feel to the campus. It almost felt like it was in its own little world away from everything else.

MM: That's where my office is. I'm in Alumnae Hall in Pembroke Quad – that old auditorium?

DB: Exactly. Yes. So, we had that kind of a space. It almost was like a very utopian type feel to it.

MM: Yeah. Like a jewel box.

DB: Exactly. Exactly. And you know of course the famous Thayer Street. You venture there and you feel like you're in a different world (laughter) and there was so much to see at that time. After a while you realize it's only a street, right? (laughter) But when you're just new to it all, it all seems overwhelming, it all seems different, seems like a lot to soak in. But for me [00:17:00], I just felt really comfortable. I felt like I made the right choice.

MM: Right away you felt that way.

DB: Yeah, I felt really at home. Didn't have any problems or issues with anyone. Really felt welcomed by the older students that were there and the counselors that were there and it was comfortable. I remember my parents coming up right before parent orientation and that was interesting because I think we were a little bit more at the time the progressives of the Ivies because I think my father took a little issue with the co-ed nature of my floor –

MM: Oh really! This is interesting. Do tell about this.

DB: – and the fact that my R.A. had condoms hanging and the little things outside of her door.

MM: Now what dorm were you in, do you remember?

DB: I was in – I can't remember where it is – and it's on the other side of campus behind where the Matlock Center [00:18:00] is, remember that? Back that way. There is like the quad area here with all the Greek fraternities and sororities and then the cafeteria is here and Harambee Center is on the other side over that side. We were on this –

MM: OK. And so, then it was co-ed by floor or by room?

DB: It was co-ed by floor.

MM: OK. And so your dad comes –

DB: – down the hall. There was a guy next to me, one more across the hall, and then my R.A. was down the hall and the condoms hanging in the –

MM: Did you know this was going to be an issue?

DB: No, no, no, no, no (laughter). In fact, I was like, "Oh, OK. This is a little different. Okay"

MM: Oh shoot. Did he stop? Did your dad stop?

DB: He stopped. He looked. And then they had like this orientation for parents where they were asking questions and he kept wanting to – and I said to my mom – and she was like – so he didn't.

MM: Did he actually ask –

DB: He didn't ask the question. She was able to prevent him from asking the question but I was just, the whole time like, "Please do not [00:19:00] embarrass me." Because he was like, "What is this?"

MM: Well that's certainly understandable –

DB: So, he did not care for that at all. OK, but it was fine. I didn't have any issues. My R.A. was pretty cool. There was a woman next door to me, across the hall from me. She was actually on the track team – Tanya Hall – and she was awesome. She was also Jamaican so we kind of got along right away. Most people would say I was fortunate but I actually ended up with an

African-American roommate, which was unusual. That's unusual. People were like, "You got who? As a roommate?" Nicole Gardiner was my roommate at the time and she was OK.

MM: (inaudible) I interviewed six graduates, Black women graduates from the class of 1968, Pembroke graduates, and they said at the time that they felt very isolated [00:20:0] because physically they felt like they were divided, like in terms of their living situations.

DB: Yeah, that's why it was so unusual.

MM: So, in the '90s, you felt like that was still going on? I think that's how people reacted –

DB: My class only had 83 African Americans, in the entire class, so it's more than what it had been in the past, but certainly by size of the university, very small. I think at the time, ours was probably one of the largest African-American classes up until that point, so it wasn't a lot, but by comparison it was, that there clearly was much more to that, which is why it was so odd for everybody, were like "you have a Black room–"

MM: That is really interesting. It's interesting for me to hear that that actually persisted, that people felt that that was totally unique.

DB: Absolutely.

MM: Do you think that the attitudes that people felt that they were still trying to divide people of color up?

DB: I don't really feel like they were trying to divide us up as much as it was just there weren't [00:21:00] that many of us to begin with and it was just the nature of the draw, like I didn't pick my roommate, the person was chosen for me, and however they come up with whatever they do is whatever they do. Now my second year, I lived in Harambee House, so my second year into my third year, I moved off-campus, so I was closer to Garrison Hall on the other side of campus, but for the most part, I didn't necessarily feel like we were being deliberately divided. Now we

had our issues – towards my junior year, we had some problems on campus – but I felt like there weren't that many of us to begin with and the year and age that we were in, that was not acceptable. I felt like there really should have been a lot more than 83 of us there.

MM: So, let's talk about that before we move on, because I want to hear about your major and your course of study, but as long as you touch on it, if you could give us a picture of what happened in your junior year, if [00:22:00] you feel comfortable.

DB: Yeah. In our junior year we had – and it didn't happen to me, it happened to one of our classmates – they walked into – I don't know if it was a bathroom – and there was the N word written on the mirror in the bathroom and it was "Go home, you don't belong here," and it caused such an upstir. I think part of it was the shock that it happened, I think the other part was like who would even do something like that. What I saw was a community coming together at that point in time to make sure the university and administration understood that it was not acceptable. I felt like there wasn't the protests of the 1960s or '50s, that it wasn't to that degree, but I think that it was quite clear [00:23:00] and the university acted in accordance with it. So they didn't try to push it to the side, they didn't try to act like it didn't happen, because pictures of it was taken, right? But they were preferring that they don't tolerate, that this is not acceptable, but I will tell you that the sentiment of myself and my classmates and the underclassmen of the time were – as a community we were closer but we were not happy.

MM: Did they figure out who did it?

DB: No, they did not. How much effort was put into that I don't know, but they did not. But I think what it did was it brought us closer together as a community, which was good, and the administration acting quickly as it did, at least verbally address it, was good, but I don't know how much effort was really put into finding out who had [00:24:00] done that – I don't know if it was a group or a person or whomever – not that much effort was done – put into that – I don't know how much because nothing really came from it, but what it did was it made everybody conscious of the fact that this exists amongst you, so everybody was acutely aware of things that were being said and done from that point forward. It's not like you ever forget, Mary.

MM: Clearly not. You don't.

DB: You don't ever forget. It's just when people remind you in that way, you are very conscious of it.

MM: Were you totally surprised that that happened on the Brown campus? Or was the climate – yeah.

DB: I wasn't totally surprised. I think I was disappointed more than I was surprised because you're in classes with these people and you're interacting with them in a social setting or in outside activity and you [00:25:00] would like to believe that this is not the way they think, especially when they're interacting with you, and not that you need to speak for a race of people, but at the same time, if anything, you would think twice about you doing something like that, so it just made everybody uneasy.

MM: Did that persist?

DB: That was the only time.

MM: Do you know what time of year? Like did that persist through the rest of the year?

DB: It was in the fall because it was just starting to get cold, but it didn't persist and if it did we weren't made aware of it. And candidly, I'm sure it did happen, the question is whether or not it got the spotlight that it ought to have, that did. It was more disappointing than it was surprising. [00:26:00]

MM: Sure. So now, if I can just switch gears a little bit, I want to hear about your academic background. You ended up majoring, or concentrating in – chemical engineering?

DB: Chemical engineering.

MM: Tell me about that, especially being a woman in STEM.

DB: (laughs) That's a whole other thing, and I'll add being a Black person in STEM is a whole other component of it. I always loved chemistry and I loved chemistry when I was in Jamaica. I loved chemistry throughout high school. I did exceptionally well in chemistry. I loved it. But I wanted something that was going to be more applicable. I didn't want to be a professor – something that can make this hands on, more applicable, can I find what that is, and I was introduced to engineering. And I also got an American Chemical Society scholarship as well, so I'm part of that society as well. They funded part of my education from my second year on [00:27:00], and all of these are academic scholarships as well by the way. Introduce to engineering, it's funny because when you start engineering class, you start with about 150 people. Big group. Big group. Big group.

MM: And what did that group look like, Delores?

DB: (laughs) Predominantly men.

MM: Paint that picture for us (laughter).

DB: Predominantly men. I will start off by telling you that. There's likely – let's see how many people we had – we had about one, two... five African-American males, all of which were on the football team, and then we had one, two, three other African-American females plus myself that were all in Engin 101, and the rest of the class was White, Asian, and male – so a handful of women for the most part across the board, and after Engin 101 [00:28: 00] came Engin 102, and that 150, 125 or so became about 75. (laughter) Right? Right, right, right. And then, we lost like more than 50 percent of the African-American population, so all the football players gone.

MM: Too much.

DB: This is not going to be it. Economics, math, you know this is not going to work, right? I was left in Engineering with two other women. One was industrial engineering. The other one was

mechanical engineering. Everybody else abandoned ship, right? Snd I was the only chemical engineer – only Black woman, only chemical engineer. Now, when you look at chemical engineering, it's likely one of the most difficult engineering disciplines you can have [00:29:00], so when you have a class of 27, which is what that kind of narrows down to when you start to get really deep into your field, you know thermodynamics, all of those are general requirements, when you start getting into fluids and heat and mass transfer, all those things are more specialized, so your class size becomes more focused, so you're talking about 25 to 27, 29 or so people in that class, probably six women. That's it. And then the rest are men. So that's what that class looks like throughout, and very difficult discipline. I think after an encounter with Organic Chemistry 1 and 2, most people are like, "I can't do this."

MM: Forget it.

DB: But a person who loves chemistry, like I did –

MM: It makes sense.

DB: – it makes sense. It all made sense to me.

MM: How were your professors in that department [00:30:00].

DB: I loved my professors. Professor Hazeltine, by the way, I had him once, − I loved him, loved him.

MM: And what's his full name?

DB: Professor Hazeltine, Barrett Hazeltine. So, he was an industrial engineering kind of major, so I only had him for like one class, it was like the general engineering class, but he never taught me after that, but I just loved him. He was just such a warm and wonderful person – and, he's still there. He's still there. I remember my chemi-engineering professor and I can't remember his name right now. I should have looked him up. I'm a very detail-oriented person and I remember

one time he said to me, “Delores, you’re staring at the trees and you’re missing the forest.” I was like, “Excuse me? Excuse me?” He was like, “I need to you step back – ”

MM: Bigger picture.

DB: “... and get the bigger picture.” And I was like, the minute he said that to me, because he’s known to be a pretty harsh professor – and I’ve got to go look up his name – he’s known to be pretty harsh, pretty direct, and most people are like, “You either like him or you don’t.” [00:31:00] I remember after I finished his class and I got an A in his class –

MM: I bet that felt good.

DB: It did. It did. He was just like, “Well done.” And I was just like, “I saw the forest.”

MM: Nice!

DB: But it never left me when he said that, and now even today, when I’m like, “Am I getting too much into the minutia of things that I’m missing the bigger picture?” My husband’s very good at this. He’s very much good at seeing the big picture, right? But I’m very much like drilling down. You won’t miss details with me. But I have to learn to stand back and he taught me that with that very small statement that he made. He taught me that. So, it was a great experience. It was hard as hell.

MM: I bet it was.

DB: OK. I spent countless hours in [Barris House?]. I would come out and go to the snack bars and like [00:32:00], “Damn!” They’re like, “They let you out?” I’m like, “I know!” I was like, “Yeah, I’m only out for a half an hour I gotta go, I’ve got a chem set.” So, people would know that I had very little time. And I pledged a sorority in my sophomore year.

MM: Oh, which sorority?

DB: Delta Sigma Theta. So, for me, it was between that and school and work – and I worked also. So, for me, I worked 20 hours a week. We had –

MM: Where did you work?

DB: There is an Alumni Center and I worked there just doing office work 20 hours a week for them, which was helpful because it helped with my laundry and everything else that I needed.

MM: Before we move on, I wanted to ask you about camaraderie in your concentration between yourself and your male counterparts, your male student counterparts. Was there a sense of camaraderie? Was there a sense of teamwork on the other side? Was it not great?

DB: It wasn't [00:33:00] antagonistic. There wasn't that, for sure. People weren't like, "Oh, yeah, yeah, let's work." It wasn't everybody was clamoring to kind of work together. That wasn't it. You had to seek out who you felt worked well with you and if you were paired, people worked and did what they had to do, right? It wasn't like, "Oh let's sit down and brainstorm." We got it done. That was kind of the nature of the environment, and that was across all my classes – so, fluids, chem-e, any time in my chem-e classes, they were more that than it was, "Oh we're going to sit and have coffee and chit chat and then we'll get −" That was not it. We were very task-oriented in our engagements, if you will. We had problem sets to do. I'm like, "OK, I'm going to tackle these three, you tackle those three, we're going to make sure we both understand them," and that's how we would work together [00:34:00]. I think the women worked closer and it was more of a relationship there.

MM: Did you become close with the other women in the chemistry group – engineering?

DB: Yes. The women worked closer together than did men to women. And that was my observation. We worked across gender, it didn't matter, but they would naturally gravitate to themselves and we would naturally gravitate to ourselves and occasionally we had to...

MM: Cross paths.

DB: Exactly. But it wasn't contentious. It wasn't antagonistic. It wasn't, "I'm not going to help you." It wasn't that. It was like, "Oh you know, let me explain to you." It was very much on that, "Let's make sure we understand it." And you know the T.A. that we had was all kind of – he was always focused on making sure we got it so we could move as a class.

MM: Move forward.

DB: Right, and if you didn't, then he'd be like, "Okay, you come visit me [00:35:00] (laughter). You and I need to have some one-on-one time." But it was more that, and I think part of it is women tend to be more comfortable with other women in showing their understanding or lack thereof than with the guys. The guys could not know anything and they would be talking to each other and they would just be fine. But I think there was always that discomfort across gender in terms of being able to express and expose your level of understanding or not.

MM: So, I want to turn now to the sorority. I don't know if that was a big part of your life at Brown –

DB: Absolutely. It still is.

MM: I also interviewed members of the Deltas, right? So that was really interesting and I want to hear your perspective on being part of that sorority and the significance to you and your experience there.

DB: For sure. I'm not sure if you interviewed Joelle Murchison [00:36:00].

MM: Mm-hmm.

DB: That would be one of my prophytes. But I'll tell you it was a crucial part of my experience, social and otherwise, and continues to be a crucial part of who I am because when you join our

sorority, it's a lifetime commitment. It's not a period in time and then it ends. But what was really attractive – and there were quite a few Black Greek-letter organizations on the campus at the time. One of my roommates, she became a Sigma Gamma Rho. I had a very close friend of mine that became a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority, so there were quite a few at the time when I joined, but what was the most appealing to me about my sorority were the women that were part of it. I could relate to who they were and what they stood for in terms of principles. "Sisterhood, scholarship and service" is our mantra – and just the level of – and even before I joined the sorority, these were women that I was very [00:37:00] close to, women that would look out for me, women that were mentors to me, so you have that level of relationship, and this just allows for you to be able to form one more personal bond that you carry with you throughout. A lot of my social interactions beyond – because you know I didn't have much, right? A lot of my social life was centered around stuff that we did for the community, stuff that we did for women on campus, stuff that we did socially. It was really centered in and around that.

MM: Do you remember a highlight?

DB: I remember several (laughs).

MM: Can you share anything?

DB: I think that one of the biggest things for us – and I remember this being a person of interest and also being a member of the sorority – was we often had what we called, "Sisters, can we talk?" That's what it was called. And it was [00:38:00] a forum – there's a lot of memorable ones but this one was personal to me because it's where you have women gather together, women of color, women just kind of discussing topics that are of major interest to women, and that could be anything from how do you get past the glass ceiling. It could be anything. Nowadays, they still have it by the way. And it's about mental health, it's about how do you claim and own your spot as a woman at the table.

MM: How often did you do this?

DB: We did it once a quarter when I was in school there.

MM: And would that be cross-sorority by any chance?

DB: Sometimes we did it. Sometimes we did it and hosted it with others, but primarily, it was one of our events and we would invite everybody, so women from other sororities would come and participate. And it just allowed for – Because I think sometimes with women, we can lose [00:39:00] sight of the fact that we can be stronger as a unit than not, and that we have more in common in some of the things that we struggle with than not, and that you can learn from shared experiences and I think this presented, albeit a social setting and it was very programmatic in nature in terms of how often it was, it presented an opportunity, so much so people would ask us, "When are you having the next one?" because it was so crucial to just being able to have that kind of get together right? Because when you think about it, you had Shades A Capella Group. If you're in that, you're in that, but you're not dealing with anybody else outside of that, right? This was bringing everybody else together and it's bringing women together to have those discussions.

MM: Did you feel that it was rooted in a form of feminism or womanism, whatever you want to say?

DB: Not really. And I'm not a feminist by any means and I think some people [00:40:00] take it to the – I just think that there are certainly disparities, and even today, and even in the profession that I am right now, there are certainly disparities in terms of women's rights one versus everybody else and I think it's even more so the case when you're talking about being an African-American woman in general because oftentimes you have to work even harder because people don't think you should be there, right? So, I think from our perspective, it wasn't grounded in a feminist type movement per se as much as it's women understanding the value and the differentiation and the contributions they bring to the table. I mean, our sorority is founded with women that have changed the shape of this country and who continue to do so and it is no surprise when you look at a Delta woman, you're going to [00:41:00] be blown away by how

phenomenal she is. She may think that she has so much more to do to be phenomenal, but when you hear her dossier, you're like blown away by it.

MM: I was. I have certainly been.

DB: You're just like, "You've done what?" Right? So, it's always for me a good litmus test that I need to do better every time. So, that's what my sorority does for me. It's always extracting the best of me and them showing me that you can do better. And they're always like the wind in your sail, like rooting you along. We were there – I was just on campus for our chapter's anniversary, 45th –.

MM: Oh, tell me about this. Was this after...

DB: This was during the BAR. Our anniversary is next year but because everybody was coming for that, we're like, we're going to celebrate our 45th now. So, we had one of our founders, Judy [Simms?] there. We had founding chapter members from Brown University there.

MM: How old is she, do you know?

DB: Oh my goodness – 45 years ago when she started the chapter. She was there.

MM: Can you email me her name? Because she would be somebody to interview.

DB: Yes. She is amazing. They all are amazing. This was our chapter's 45th anniversary, so we had sorors there that I had never met – '77, '76, '78, '80. I'm like, "I'm sorry, I was four." (laughs). It's being around wisdom and accomplishment and it reminds you of just how phenomenal this organization is and it was [00:43:00] fantastic. It was just an opportunity to make connections with sorors I would never have seen. I know they came before me and they paved the path, but I hadn't met them before, but this was a great chance for me to do that. And we did it at the BAR. It was just a great time of fellowship. We actually also did the book drive, so we collected and donated – the Alumni Association was able to help us donate and collect

books that we donated to the local schools in Providence as one of our community service activities. But it was fantastic – a chance to reconnect, a chance to do a service-oriented project, a chance to just socialize and interact and network. The chair of the actual reunion, she funds a fund, a scholarship that is housed under [Imani Page?] and it gives funds to students to attend our summer [00:44:00] – I think it's one-week or two-week STEM program − at Brown University. So, she was there and we talked about that. They wanted me to speak about the importance of women in STEM and engineering and when you're there and you're amongst one of the younger sorors, the older sorors don't really know who you are and what you've accomplished. So, one of my prophytes said to me, she's like, "Tell them who you are," and I said, "Okay." I have three U.S. patents and I have five IBM patents and I was an engineer by practice for post undergrad for eight years before I got my MBA, and I have an MBA from Chicago Booth and I have a master's –

MM: Yeah, tell us more a little bit about these things.

DB: Yes, I have a masters in material science, but I've chosen to be science field. I'm a salesperson but in the IT space. So, after I graduated from Brown [00:45:00], I started at IBM and I wanted –

MM: Did they recruit on campus? Sorry to interrupt you. Did you have to reach out to them, or how'd that work?

DB: They had a talent program that they were focused – IBM at the time was focused on recruiting diverse talent. I don't even know, I think it came through NSBE. I was a part of the National Society of Black Engineers when I was at Brown on campus. I was the secretary, I was the PCI chair, Pre-College Initiative chair, and I was also the chair, and I learned about this program through NSBE where they were recruiting. And they actually hosted like a reception – it was close to Providence, it was like Boston area – and they paid for us to come and we spent the time there just getting information about this talent-rotation program that IBM had and it was all in different technical disciplines, so it was an engineering, science-based recruiting effort, and I interviewed on-site [00:46:00] with three different hiring managers and was extended an offer

there and that's how I ended up going. When I accepted the offer, I had also applied to graduate school, because I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, and I got accepted to Georgia Tech, but then I deferred because I was like, "Let me see if this is really what I want." So, I deferred for a year but then I said to IBM, "If I defer this for a year and I come to work for you, if I decide to go get my master's, will you pay for it?" And they said, "Yeah, we will." So, I said, "Okay."

MM: That's a done deal.

DB: So, I went and I decided to stay and a year after starting – we worked in Poughkeepsie, so I was at their semiconductor manufacturing plant in Poughkeepsie, New York, and we were making microchips for the mainframe systems and power systems – all the non-sexy stuff that if it goes down like my Macy's website today was real slow. I was like, "Daggone it, who the hell? Which server is not working properly, right?" So [00:47:00] all the non-sexy stuff. So, I worked there and after my first year, I applied for the Rensselaer Polytechnic Distance Education Program, so that's usually a four-year program. I was not going to take four years – I couldn't deal with four years, so I completed it in two-and-a-half years. I spent a semester there – they allowed me to take a semester off. I spent a semester on campus and I finished my thesis, so I got a material science master's and I was able to work on a project that I was actually working on at work, which I then got one of my first patents on, so that was my first U.S. patent, which was tremendous because I wrote on it for my master's, I was working on it and we got a U.S. patent on it.

MM: Can you describe it so that we can understand it (laughs)?

DB: I know, right. Basic terms. When I started working, I was a reactive ion etch engineer, so basically when you work on any kind of silicon wafer, or when you look in your computer you see these [00:48:00] little color-coded chips, is what it looks like, right? So that's color-coded based off of the depth and topography of it, so when you build a fabricated chip, what happens is you put a layer of polymer, so to speak, on top of it and then it comes to me and I etch, I make permanent holes in it based off of some predesigned kind of topography that they want, and when I make an etch in it, I make it permanent, so if you made a mistake then we got a pro–

MM: There's no erasing.

DB: – we done. We done. And what one of my senior engineers and I came up with was an ability – this is one of the three patents – an ability to almost resurface, reface it and clean it and start again because those things are worth like $3,000 before you even get to that back end of the line. So, if you get to middle of the line, you start to increase the value of those things are like $6 – 7,000 before [00:49:00] you even start to put your copper wires in to finish the product. The problem is if you screw up at that point, that's $7,000 out the window.

MM: That's it.

DB: So, this was an opportunity for us to kind of coat it and almost like put a layer on top so that you can redo what you did and fix it. So that's what my master's thesis was on, that's what one of my patents was on. So, that's the basics of – I can't explain it to you. And then what I did after I finished my master's, IBM started their 300 millimeters, much larger wafers. We were supposed to be second to the market. We were first. It's never good to be first because then you go through the pain of learning everything that you want everybody else to work out the kinks and then you come. Unfortunately, we were not. We were not the second. The great thing about that for me though is that it gave me the chance to really work in an entrepreneurial type environment in a large [00:50:00] corporation because there were more unknowns than there were knowns. We were dealing with new equipment, new problems, new specification, and we were manufacturing the first chips for Nintendo, so that's [where it had some boss?], which is pretty cool. But being there and working through that project, what it exposed me to was the business side of the plant which, as an engineer, you don't really focus on it. But in that environment, because there were so many more concerns, so many unknowns, you had no choice but to be in the mix of everything, from a project management, a leader perspective. So, I was hearing conversation about balance sheet, and I'm like, "What are they talking about?" I'm like, "Does that work the same way that it does in my check book? No, it doesn't? Okay." But for me, and I spoke to many of my mentors, which was a constant for me throughout my IBM career there, was having great mentors along the way to guide you, right, all of which were men, by the

way. [00:51:00] So, what was good, one of my mentors said, "Del, you know you can go part-time and you can get the MBA over time," and I'm like, "Mmm, yeah no." So, I took a two-year leave of absence –

MM: Oh, and they approved it?

DB: They did. And I went to Chicago Booth and got my MBA. IBM recruited me back into their – at the time their financing organization.

MM: I'm sorry, did they pay for the MBA then too?

DB: No. They paid for my master's, though.

MM: But they let you take a leave.

DB: Yeah. So, my master's they paid for. That was a great master's. I paid $120 for it, which was great. I'm like that's the best master's I've ever got. It's on the wall and it's great. But the MBA was all on my dime, which was fine because I didn't want to go part-time. I couldn't afford the mistakes along the way. It's just the game is not the same for me, so I couldn't afford to make those mistakes [00:52:00] because I didn't know. So I took the time and went and got my MBA and I came back and my mentor at the time was the general manager for IBM Global Financing and he subsequently became the CFO, so I came back and at that point they were starting a minted program which was targeting five of the top five business schools – Columbia, Wharton, Chicago, MIT Sloan, and there's another, and they were tapping talent to come into the program. Spent two and a half years there, ended up in sales, which was selling money, right, because you're thinking finance, right? I'm selling money, and one of my mentors said to me, he's like, "Okay, Del, I need you to carry the bag. Okay? Anybody can get money. I need you to carry the bag." So I moved over into our S and D organization, sales and distribution, and supported one [00:53:00] of IBM's largest accounts with a mentor, with a team lead who then left and I became the team lead, did that for two years, then I became a business unit executive and started to have a team that supported all of New England and all of New York metro. I did

that for three or four years and then went and took what IBM would likely consider an executive leave to work for a partner. This is where they position you to really learn the channel part of the business, so that you're able to come back and better lead in the organization. There's no substitute for watching from the side. There's no substitute for it. So, I actually worked for a partner for two-and-a-half years, started a managed service practice for them, which now is actually the bread and butter of where they're seeing their earnings because historically partners have always been more [00:54:00] traditional hardware resellers and very few of them have migrated to a services solution-based type of selling. This allowed them to pivot and I had to show them how to make the transition, so that was good, and then one of my mentors, who worked at Oracle, said, "Del, I need you to come over here." It was a time for me to either go back to IBM after 17-and-a-half years of being with IBM or try something new. So, I tried something new. So that's where I am now.

MM: And that's where you are. I don't want to take up too too much of your time. We're coming up on an hour but I think this is fascinating because I feel like in my own life I've experienced mentorship from men in my career that have actually been incredibly helpful to me, so it's something that I really want to give voice to that through this as well, so if you could speak a little bit more about that and what that is like, like when male mentorship to you as a woman, professional, [00:55:00] just speak to that if you can. It's important.

DB: Yeah, it is important. I'll bifurcate that in my response. I have only had male mentors. I've had one female mentor in my entire 20-some-odd-years of career and she's phenomenal. She'll tell you, she only has male mentors too (laughter). But I think one of the things that has been crucial especially for me in this space where it's predominantly male-dominated is to understand the person you are dealing with because I think sometimes, as women, we approach things differently, we interact with each other differently, we speak differently and we all seem to understand that code of conduct, if you will, in terms of those exchanges and those kinds of interactions. Whereas I think with male mentors, for me, and they've always been very senior [00:56:00], so it's not as if they are looking for me to give them anything back per se and it's not as if they are sacrificing in terms of helping me. They are doing it because they feel like I'm the right candidate, and the best candidate to help. I think the best thing you can do for your mentor

is to always make sure that you are on point. Never be in a position where they question your judgment, your character, your ability to deliver. And when you have a reputation of doing that, it's easy for someone to say, "You know what? I'm going to go to bat for that person." But their advice has been instrumental. I remember one mentor said to me years ago, he said, "Del, handle paperwork once." "Okay, sir, got it." To me, that is you start it, you finish it, you move on. People wonder why I'm so efficient. My husband says I work in batches, and I do, [00:57:00] because it allows me to think through whatever it is that I need to do for that person or for that thing and complete it. So, I handle paperwork once, very simple kind of guidance. Another one of my mentors said to me, "Whenever you are looking at a career choice, always think about whether or not it's a broadening experience or a deepening experience," and I said, "Okay." He goes, "Because there's nothing wrong with a broadening experience nor is there anything wrong with a deepening experience." It's a very different way of looking at a lateral move versus a promotional move because sometimes you take extra steps along that same horizontal path and you feel like, "Why am I still here?" But it makes that next step up so much better because you're so much more prepared, you're so much better equipped, nobody can run circles around you, and so when I look at what I'm doing next, like OK, "What is this? [00:58:00] What am I going to get out of this?" Don't look at the job necessarily as, "I want that job," it's more, "What do I want to get out of that job? Is it making me more marketable? Is it adding to my toolbox of skills? Am I going to be better because I've done this?" And there's sometimes you take a job because like, "OK, this is going to be instead of running a 50-person organization, I'm running a 100-person organization." That's a broadening role because to manage 100 people is very different than managing 50 people, so it's always measuring it, and across that. And then another thing he shared with me is you have the four quadrants of people: those that are willing and able, those that willing but not able, those that are unwilling and unable (laughs) right? It's like walking –

MM: I need to see this.

DB: – So, when you're looking at people and it's always hard when you have to let go of people, right? As an executive I've had [00:59:00] to do that. Every single time, it is just gut wrenching

to do it and at any point, you know, another one said to me, he said, “You know Del, if you ever get comfortable with letting people go, you in the wrong job.”

MM: You’re in the wrong job.

DB: Right? But being able to look at that person and being able to figure out where are they in that quadrant and not in an unfeeling way of doing it, but it’s being able to be at peace because men do this very easily – easier, I think – but it’s looking at that in a way that’s, OK, “Where does this person fall? Are they better suited for somewhere else? What is this preventing them from doing? Who should be in this spot?” You know, really walking yourself through that process, so having that framework for me – and I’m a very methodical person, being an engineer, even as a salesperson, I’m very methodical – it just allows you to kind of think through things [01:00:00]. So those are like nuggets that I’ve gotten from various mentors throughout my career that even today, I use in terms of just how I interact with people: what I do, how I say, what I look for –

MM: And maybe how you mentor others.

DB: Exactly. Exactly. People who are mentees should always realize that they bring something to the table.

MM: Oh absolutely.

DB: Right? Just because you’re dealing with someone who’s very senior that you think that they may not benefit from the relationship, you’re underselling yourself. I remember one of my mentors, who was head of North America sales and distribution, he said to me, he was like, “Del, we’re having such a hard time with attrition for the young people – you guys.” And I said, “Okay?” And he’s like, “Why is that? You tell me why that is. Everybody else is telling me why it is. Can you tell me why it is?” And I said [01:01:00], “Do you want the truth –“

MM: The real answer.

DB: " - Or do you want me to tell you what you want to hear." He was like – I said, "Okay." I said, "Well, honestly, when you work for a company like you guys, it's like somebody has to die for somebody to move up in the company. It's like you all are occupying the seats for 10, 15, 20 years. We don't have 10, 15, 20 years to work – by the way, the stuff you tell us, we know that and all of this other stuff two years ago, but it's almost like you have to do time to get there."

MM: Yeah. That's such a Generation X, millennial thing to have to voice.

DB: I said, "So that's the problem. So, if we've got to sit and wait for somebody to croak or leave for us to be able to truly be put in that spot that we should be in – really?" And he was like, "Nobody's ever given it to me that raw." I'm like, "I don't what to tell you, man. [01:02:00] I don't know what to tell you."

MM: That is the honest truth, though. That's across industries.

DB: It is. It is. And he would always say to me, he was just like, "Well how is it for you?" And I said, "What do you mean?" Because that's a broad question, a broad statement. And for a Black woman in IT it is very difficult. It is very difficult. And even as an executive today, I will walk in – and I shared this with young girls who I speak to at STEM events and tech events and coding events – and you always have to rise above it, which is unfortunate, but you do. And I'll walk in with a rep, White man, and the person will sit there and the executive will sit there and they'll turn to the man and –

MM: Yeah. Physically direct the entire conversation to them.

DB: (inaudible) the executive [01:03:00] and the person would say, "Actually, no. She's the executive –"

MM: She's the boss.

DB: – and then what they would ask me next Mary is, “So, where did you go to school?” I am 20 some odd years out of undergrad and I have to now tell you my dossier for you to feel like I should sit here. And I would say, “I went to Brown University undergrad. I’m a chemical engineer.” And they would do this, they would sit back, “Oh.” And the whole conversation would change. The whole dynamics would be different. It’s almost like, “Oh, I didn’t realize who I was dealing with.” It’s very interesting.

MM: You still have to qualify it every time.

DB: Every time. Every time. And it is unfortunate, but that’s how it is, and I think more and more, as I [01:04:00] speak to – my little girl wants to be a scientist, I have to show her and I take her with me if I go and speak and I can. I say, “Come, so you can see and hear what other people have to say.” There are a lot of successful Black women in tech, a lot of them. There’s not nearly enough, though. There should be a whole lot more. But it’s just difficult. It’s a very different dynamic. And I’m part of a women’s group now at work and they’ll talk and their issues are just not my issues. The thing they’re struggling with is just not what I struggle with. I said to one woman – she’s like, “Del, why are you always so quiet? You’re not quiet.” I said, “No I’m not, but I have nothing to contribute to the conversation.” And she said, “Well why is that?” [01:05:00] I said, “Because you stuff you struggle with is not the stuff I struggle with.”

MM: Is this a group of predominantly White women in this group, right?

DB: Mm-hmm. And she said, “Well what do you mean?” I said, “Because when you walk in the room, people see you as a woman. When I walk in the room, people see me as a Black.” So, she said, “Oh I never thought about it that way.” I said, “Exactly.” I said, “So you’re overcoming women’s issues. Before I even get there, I’m overcoming whatever stereotypes or whatever implicit biases you have that deal with Black people. I’m overcoming that before I even get to the women’s issues. I’m not even there yet.” So, she was like, “I never thought of it that way.” I said, “So what you’re struggling with, I don’t struggle with.”

MM: Good luck with that.

DB: I'm like, "Yeah, that's par [01:06:00] for the course. We'll get there when I get there."

MM: To pause, and to wrap up this interview, do you have any last thoughts that you want absolutely just to make sure that you get out that I missed asking about?

DB: What I loved about Brown was the fact that I could choose my own path, if you will. I got accepted to MIT and I went to visit there after the fact. I was stressed the heck out just visiting, right? And not that the discipline I chose was easy by any means, but I think what the environment created was just an opportunity for you to – if you changed, it was OK. If you changed your mind, it was all right. You didn't lose multiple months and years in doing so, right? I think it just affords students [01:07:00] the opportunity to know that it's OK for the first few years, first couple of years – you can course correct and it not be detrimental, because for me, I was on a four-year and had to be out, financially, so I didn't have any latitude to mess up and to figure myself out year five, unless I was walking out with a master's degree. So, I think what it does is it removes some of the stress and the strain that students have, feeling like, "Oh my God, I've got to know, I've got to know." And there are some people who know, which is great, and there are some people that are not quite sure, and it gives the student a little bit more freedom to say it's OK to not know. Use the next year to figure it out and you're still good. So, by comparison, one of the most differentiated things [01:08:00] for me – and I knew what I wanted to do and I did what I said I was going to do, but I also watched many people change.

MM: And maybe it made you a more creative thinker too. I always wonder if that influences the way that people are.

DB: It does. Absolutely, because it's not so rigid in how things are delivered. You have this foundational kind of – here's how you should think about it. The trees or the forest, right? (laughter) Here's how you should think about it. Now, step back and now you can apply that, regardless of what it is. That's how Chicago is also. Chicago Booth is all about foundational – the fundamentals – because you can solve any problem once you understand –

MM: (inaudible) think.

DB: Exactly. Exactly.

MM: Okay, well I want to thank you. I’m going to end this interview now and just thank Delores so much for being part of this interview. Your interview now becomes part of a collection that includes over 200 interviews with women who attended Pembroke College in Brown University and Brown University [01:09:00] post-merger, so people far and wide will be using your interview from all over the country and all over the world.

DB: Oh, that’s awesome. Thank you.

MM: So, thank you very much.

- END -