

Transcript – Katani Alexandria Eaton, class of 1985

Narrator: Katani Alexandria Eaton

Interviewer: Mary Murphy

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Interview Time: 4:11pm

Location: Pembroke Hall, Brown University, Rhode Island

Length: 2 audio files; 45:10

Track 1

Mary Murphy: [00:00] OK. So, good afternoon. My name is Mary Murphy and I am the Nancy L. Buc Pembroke Center Archivist. It is September 21, 2018 at 4:11pm in Pembroke Hall on the second floor. I'm here today joined by two others to collect an oral history interview with a member of the Brown University Alumni community. At this time, I'll have my fellow interviewer introduce herself and then our interviewee introduce herself as well.

Malana Krongelb: My name is Malana Krongelb, class of 2019. I am a major in Ethnic Studies and I am a student archivist at the Pembroke Center.

Katani Eaton: And I'm Katani Eaton Sumner, class of 1985. While here, I was Katani [Alexandria Eaton?], now I'm Katani Sumner.

MM: [01:00] Great. So Katani, if you could begin your interview today, take us back to the beginning. If you could please describe or tell us a little bit about your upbringing, where you were, you know, born and raised, that kind of information, and tell us about your first inklings about college and then specifically Brown.

KE: So I was born in 1963 in Boston, Massachusetts, and I was being raised in the home of parents who had not gone to college. I think my dad had done maybe a little bit of time in college. But my dad was murdered when I was five, so I was raised by a single mom, the youngest of four, and my siblings were twin brothers seven years older and then a sister eight years older. So as you can imagine, so when my dad died, it was like – my siblings were

teenagers, but I was in kindergarten. But my dad was very education-oriented. He was a civil rights activist type of person, [02:00] very involved in the community but had also done time in prison, so he had this kind of interesting background.

So I was in the Boston public schools for kindergarten, but afterwards, I entered the METCO program, which is a voluntary desegregation program, which allowed me to be bussed from Boston to Lexington, which is a suburb a little north of Boston. So I was from first grade through 12th in the first METCO class to go from first grade through 12 because the METCO program was started in 1966 and my class was the first one to go all the way through. And so I went from being in the inner city to this suburban area where I was exposed to white people that were nice white people. Because at that time in Boston, there was this pre-mandatory bussing, but we still didn't interact much with white folks, so the white people lived in South Boston; black people lived mostly Dorchester, Roxbury, and those areas. And I remember being fearful of white people because, if you went to this place called Carson Beach, they might throw rocks at you. We couldn't go to Carson Beach.

And so then [03:00] in the early '70s, '74 I think it was or '75, when mandatory bussing took place, I was already in a voluntary bussing program. So we were riding these busses out to the suburbs with the relatively nice white people. We had some issues, but they were nice white people versus what you saw on television, busses being bricked and people yelling the N-word and just saying all these hateful things. And at one point, our bus did get hit by a brick and we were like, kind of traumatized. We were like, "We're not even going to South Boston. Why are people throwing bricks at us?" I remember the superintendent or someone sat down with us to talk to us and made sure that we felt safe. So that was my experience being in an integrated, or desegregated anyway. It was still a very small percentage – the kids of color were a very small percentage of the students out in Lexington.

But that experience was pivotal for me because in high school – I was a sophomore in high school. Now, I had never heard of Ivy League; I really didn't know what Ivy League was. I had heard of Harvard because everybody had heard of Harvard, but the term Ivy League was not something I was familiar with. [04:00] I was a high school athlete. I played varsity basketball; I sang in a band; I was in National Honors Society, class vice president, so by all intents and purposes, I was kind of like the cream of the crop of the METCO student population. And while riding on the bus, there was a young woman who I'll never forget who was two years ahead of

me who I admired because she seemed so put together, and I wasn't really thinking about college necessarily, but all of the white students were talking about college. So I started thinking, I probably should be thinking about this because it seems to be something that's really important.

I mean, flash ahead, I'm now a high school counselor and mentoring teacher, and that's another story, because I think it all played in – because I see how students of color particularly are kind of overlooked, even what I would consider to be one of the more outstanding students, which was me, because I was doing really well. So this young woman on the bus was talking about looking at Duke and Brown University and I had never really heard of Brown and I just remember in my mind [05:00] thinking, if that's where she wants to go, then I want to go there too because I want to be like her and I don't know what this school is, but it must be something special if she's talking about Duke and Brown.

And so for some reason, not too long after, there was an information session or something that was held in Boston and I went there. It was at the Freedom House and I went there and I met a student who was really attractive too. I thought he was so cute. I was like, oh, he's at Brown. I was like, OK. [laughter] And I was with my mom and she was kind of like, "I don't know if you can go there. Brown? You know, it sounds really expensive." And I just remember being really headstrong and determined, thinking, oh well, I don't know if I can get in. I want to go there because [Judith?] was going to go there and this guy seems really nice.

So then I just started actively looking at all the opportunities to kind of find out more about Brown. I was probably maybe a junior at this point in high school, and I remember talking to – it might have been the beginning of my senior year – I talked to my guidance counselor and I said, [06:00] "You know, there's this school called Brown University and it sounds really great," and I had already heard about the open curriculum because I heard about that at the open house, and I really did not like math at that time. I was like, oh my God, if I could avoid taking math for the rest of my life, I would be just fine. Open curriculum? Sign me up. And I wanted to work in children's television and I thought I was going to be the next lady on *Sesame Street*.

So anyway, I went to talk to my guidance counselor, who will remain nameless, but I said, "I really want to go to this school called Brown University," and she was like, "Oh, but you won't get in." She was like, "You wouldn't get in." And I was like, "I wouldn't get in? Like, I'm about the best we got. Like, really? You're not even going to encourage me to take a chance?"

Like, “No, you wouldn’t get in.” So fortunately I’m the type of person that’s like, “Oh, oh, OK, good, then I will apply early.” So I did. [laughs]

MM: Good for you.

KE: So I applied early. And in between the time of applying early – so at that point, I was getting in the mindset of, all right, college and, you know, I had done well all pretty much through high school. And so I got my act together to apply early [07:00] and I really only finished a few applications. I thought – you know, I was like, people want to talk to me about basketball? I was like, that’s fine. Maybe I’m not going to focus on basketball.

But one of my visits – so Brown had these programs that you could, as a minority student, I guess come and visit, and they paired me up with Ramona Shuberth – I’ll say her name, I love her still. So Ramona was the first contact on Brown’s campus. I stayed with her somewhere and she introduced me to some of her classmates and then I told her I sang and she was like, “Oh, you might want to check out the gospel choir,” which was being led I think at that point by [Candace Barry?] and she – well let me see. I don’t know what the name of it was then. It might have been Shades of – whatever the name of the choir was. I went to a choir rehearsal and they were singing a song that I sang in the choir back home.

So I’m in this rehearsal and I was just singing this song with all my heart, and I was like in the soprano section or something like that, and I was just singing loud and proud and after the song, they all looked at me and the choir director came over and she said, “What – why aren’t you in this choir? Like, oh my God, you have an amazing voice.” [08:00] And I said, “Because I’m a senior in high school.” [laughter] And she was like, “You need to come to Brown. You’re coming to Brown. You need to come.” And everyone was like, “This is what – you know, you should come back and visit.” And I just started sending everything – I took photography. I sent my prints. I was like – everything was, I’m on a mission to go to Brown, so it was just so exciting. You know, I never finished application. So I was going to apply to Harvard, so I said, “Let’s go for it. Brown, Harvard, who cares?”

So I went and I remember it was December 21st or something, I got the Brown acceptance letter and I don’t think I finished any more applications at that point. And the Harvard people actually called me to ask me why I hadn’t finished the application. So I went to

visit the Harvard campus and I remember distinctly, when I was at the Harvard, you know – what you call it? – visit, and the tour, and like, to me, the tour guide very much had this air about him like, “You should be happy to be here. You should be proud to be here. [09:00] Don’t you want – ” And I remember thinking, “You don’t know me. You should be happy if I come here.” Like, I don’t even like that vibe, like, what? Oh, it’s like that. [laughs]

So when I got into Brown and then Harvard called to say why hadn’t I finished my application, I was like, “I don’t need to. I’m going to Brown. Thank you very much.” I’ve since gone on to get a master’s from Harvard, by the way, so I’m not totally mad Harvard, but anyway. But at the time, it just made so much of a difference, the energy here at Brown. It was very much like, we want you to come. We like it and the vibe, I just fell in love at Brown. And now I work at a high school and I tell the kids, especially the kids of color, just, you know, apply, go visit, because it’s still to me the coolest Ivy. And I do interviews for the Brown alumni whatever it is, and so I – when I do the interviews, I can almost tell the right kids – like, all the kids that I think should get in don’t get in, but I know the ones that I think shouldn’t get in and they usually don’t get in either, because to me, Brown is for people who are smart – that’s a given – but they also [10:00] tend to have an artistic edge, and they tend to be community-oriented and tend to be people who are not arrogant and that’s – back in the ‘80s anyway.

I can’t speak for now, I hope it’s still the same, but it just seemed like the more eclectic-type people – because once you get on campus, I love the feeling of, we know you’re smart. We want you to be successful. I didn’t feel as much like, you better prove that you belong here. It was more like [us?]. So also when I got in – I was class vice president – the class president said, “You only got in because you were black.” That wounded me. Yes.

MM: Said that to you?

KE: Yes, to my face. Because she didn’t get in and so it was that, “Well, you just got in because you’re black.” And I remember thinking, oh my God, maybe she’s right. You know, because I was not that con – I mean, once you get in and people are like, “Oh, that’s Ivy League, oh my God,” and I was like, “Oh, OK.” And then people started saying what that meant and I was like, “Oh my God. What does this mean?” I was like – you know that whole Imposter Syndrome, like, [11:00] oh no, wait till they find out I’m really not supposed to be here, ah! So I arrived on

campus with this determination to succeed because I just could not fail, because then I would prove the stereotype that I just got in because I was black, and therefore –

So my first semester, I took one class for a grade and the other classes pass – [laughs] satisfactory, no credit, because I was just so scared. So I took the Modes of Thought – I think you had to take that pass/fail anyway, and then I took some other classes. So I proudly say, after the end of my first semester, my GPA was 4.0 because I had my A and my three S's. So, but once I got on campus, and I remember taking a class called Intro to Judaism, because when I was a junior in high school, I became a Christian, like born again. I didn't grow up in church, but I was this radical, "God is for me," kind of person. And so there was that faith in operation as well. So I prayed about going to Brown and then when I got into Brown I just felt like, this is God. I'm supposed to be here. [12:00]

And then I took a course called Intro to Judaism and I remember, a good friend of mine – that might have been sophomore year – but I took this course with Jacob Neusner and my roommate was pre-med – and no, yeah, so one of my roommates, must have been junior year I heard this. But anyway, my confidence was built somewhat during freshman year, but it took a while for me to really feel like, oh, you can kill this. I started as a semiotics major because that's the closest thing we had to Communications, and my brothers would tease me saying, "What the heck is semiotics? You know, you [semi?]-auto mechanic? You only change tires?" I remember saying, "You only change tires?" I was like, "No, it's like, the study of signs and symbolisms." And where I'm from, they're like, "No, no. You need a, like no."

So my default was Psychology, because I'm like, I'm from a wacky family. This will be good. I have a lot of craziness going on. Let me do Psychology. So I changed majors. But anyway, I took – freshman year [13:00] I did the Gateway to Success, [Engine 9?], Dean Hazeltine. [laughter] Everybody loves him, still do. And then I ended up being a TA for that, but Jacob Neusner was one of the times where he said something to my roommate. He said like, you know, "Katani is really bright." And I'm like, what does that mean? And he was like – he told my roommate and then she told me, "She's very insightful and she sees things that everybody else doesn't see." So that really helped build my confidence. And it's not just about the academics; it's about having intuition; it's about being able to infer and things like that. And I was a class totally out of my realm, which was Intro to Judaism.

So that helped. So for me, Dean Ashley was an amazingly encouraging – he was a black dean, who was very, you know, supportive of black students. So I circumlocute when I speak, so I'll just try to bring it back around. [laughter] So I got here because I was motivated to follow [14:00] after this woman as a role model, and then I was also motivated because my guidance counselor said I would not get in. Then once I did get in, I was determined to be successful and I found an incredible peer group at Brown, so Brown had a program – I believe it still exists – called Third World Transition Program, and even prior to that was early admittance day in April. So if you got in early, they wanted you to come visit – I think it was in April – to you know, really – I guess it wasn't early decision then, so you still could back out. It was early admit – it was EA not ED. So they still wanted to convince everyone who had gotten in early to come to Brown. I was already coming.

But so it was great because I met this woman who's still my friend to this day. Her name is – excuse me – it was Michelle Baker then; it's Michelle Baker-Richardson now, and we met, and we had a similar energy. We met that April. And to be honest with you, as much as I had gone to school with white people, I knew I wasn't quite ready to live with one. [laughs] Because I was like, it's going to be enough of a transition going [15:00] to this Ivy League school and leaving home, and Michelle and I, we were like, “You want to be roommates? Because let's just make this transition a little bit easier. I don't really – I don't know what it's going to be like to have to live with somebody who's so different.” And Michelle and I were like, yes, so we agreed and we put our names down. She was either from Chicago, originally from Atlanta, but I think at that point, she lives in Chicago now.

Wherever she was from, she and I were very different in terms of our affect, which was hilarious. She was a dancer; I was a singer. She was this little petite thing; I'm this, you know, athletic, kind of strong, strappy person, and we were just so – we got along really well. We were really funny.

MM: Do you remember your first night? Your first – by any chance, your first day on campus? Do you have a first memory?

KE: I have a – I remember arriving at Third World Transition Program and just being so happy to see so many people of color, and so many enthusiastic, energetic people. And I remember, you

know, meeting Michelle and thinking – and sizing her up, and she was probably sizing me up, and thinking, you know what, I can [16:00] do this. Because she’s also assertive and outspoken. I knew I didn’t want to be with somebody who’s scared of me. You know? But and she wasn’t, and so that was good. But I don’t remember that part. Like, I remember my first day arriving on campus to be dropped off. So my mom was always – and probably until the time she died for some reason, stayed intimidated by white people. So in high school, my mother was not the type to show up at the school or anything. I was very independent from the time I was in elementary school. I remember thinking, all right, it’s just me. Because my mom just – she didn’t drive until she was like 36, when my dad died, and she didn’t really drive. She had to learn how to drive, so she couldn’t make the trip out to Lexington. They would provide a bus for parent conferences at some point, so she was not the on-campus type of person.

So when it came time to go to Brown, like, I think this whole thing was overwhelming for her. So my grandfather and my step-grandmother came along to drop me off, and I just remember arriving at Brown, 105 Jacobson [17:00] was my room, and I don’t remember who got there first, me or Michelle – I feel like I did. And my grandmother, she helped make up my bed and everything and my mom was just being really weird. Like, she wasn’t – it was almost like she felt really uncomfortable being in this environment. And so you know, they made my bed and like, I felt like my grandmother – they were going to – they wanted to go out to eat and spend some time here and my mom was like, “OK, I’m ready to go.” She’s like, “Oh, OK.” And I remember her leaving and just leaving me here and I was like, oh, OK. That’s about what I’m used to. I’m on my own. All right, here we go.

And it just felt weird because other people I think were more affluent and just were more used to that college experience. They like – my own daughter went to college; we took her down to Spellman, we like set up the room, Target run; we stayed overnight. And my husband cried and [laughter] it was so emotional and dramatic. I remember just being plopped here and like, “OK, bye,” “All right, love you, bye. OK, Here I am. It’s – [18:00]” So yeah, I just remember the black community though being very inviting and TWTP and the Early Admit was so helpful because you already knew people, so you didn’t feel, like, isolated. You already knew, they’re going to get here eventually because we know they’re coming. We had communicated ahead of time. We knew at least a few were definitely coming from Third World Transition, or from the Early Admit back in the spring.

And so I just remember that and just diving in. I was overcommitted doing crazy stuff as well, so I might seem like a slacker because I took three pass/fail courses, however, I was also – my freshman year, OK, this is how crazy. I think it was – yeah, my freshman year, one of the biggest transformative experiences I had was being involved with the production workshop of *Hair*. So you know, David Yazbek, award-winning, you know, musician, you know, amazing, prize-winning, everything, just won another something Tony for this musical he’s doing [19:00] in New York now, he was the director. And I had done like theater when I was younger and I had definitely been singing, and the audition signs were all around campus: “We want a diverse cast. We want people of color.” So I just didn’t really pay much attention to it because, at the time, I think I might have been playing basketball. I played like JV or something like that. It was like “What? JV? What is all this?” So I played here and I was on the radio, WBUR. [laughs] I’m singing in the choir. So I was all in. I was totally, “Yeah!”

But the auditions came around, and so Michelle, who also helped me out – I’m sorry. This is going to be in the archive Michelle, but you’ve heard me say this – so Michelle was a dancer but she wasn’t really that good of a singer. She really was not a singer. She was a really amazing dancer. So the auditions came up for Brown and Michelle auditioned. And I was like, “Oh, that’s so cool. You’re going to be in *Hair*, oh great.” And so Michelle got a callback and I was like, hold up. [laughs] You – really? [20:00] You got a callback? I need to find out about this thing. So I need to go to these auditions. So I went to the audition and it was amazing. I got a callback, ended up getting the black female lead, opposite [Steven Hugh?], so I was Dionne and he was Hud and I have vivid details of the audition process and everything, but I won’t bore you with those. But it was just incredible to get a lead in this production, which ended up being amazing, selling out.

And then they ultimately went on tour. I opted out of the tour, because, you know, the nude scene – I never did the nude scene. It was this whole Christianity craziness in the play. We had to say – like, I refused to say certain curse words. I was using euphemisms like, “Buck,” you know, instead of [laughter] – it was just so funny. I was just hoping nobody would notice I wasn’t saying the words because I was like, so radical, like, ah. But and I was really involved with the Christian community on campus. That’s a whole ‘nother sidebar.

MM: Yeah, did you stay with that throughout the four years? [21:00]

KE: Stay with that. I was the radical Christian on campus, ask anybody who knew me freshman year, because I came up with such zeal, but not a lot of wisdom. Because I did not grow up in church, so I became this radical Christian when I was a junior in high school. So my senior year, I was very involved in this church, and so when I came on campus, there was a woman named Pamela – I hope she'll never hear this because I talk to here still all the time – but anyway, she stood up in Manning Chapel and she said, "If anybody wants to see the real [move?] of God on campus, come see me; come talk to me." We were all like, "Who's this? That's weird." And so we went and she said, "There used to be a Christian fellowship on campus called Romans Eight and they were very serious and, you know, this evangelical movement, and we're hoping to resurrect that on campus." So I was like, Romans Eight, OK, Romans Eight, taken from Romans chapter eight.

So with the help of Pamela, paused – can you pause it?

- End of Track 1 -

Track 2

MM: [00:00] We're recording.

KE: Thank you. So, Pamela Tolbert was this wonderful woman who stood up and proudly proclaimed, "Anybody who wants to see the move of God on Brown's campus, come talk to me," and blah, blah, blah. So we – I don't remember who I was with, but I know I was intrigued and I followed up with her and she talked about this Christian fellowship called Romans Eight. So with the help of Pamela and some alum who came back to advise – Michael Smith and his wife Cynthia, Melvin Lee, they kind of helped us understand what was going on on campus when they were here in, like, 10 years prior at least or so.

So we started up with these Bible studies again and we started going to churches in Providence. I think I bought a car maybe my freshman year – no I didn't buy a car yet. I had a car in high school but I didn't bring it here. So I don't remember how we got to church, but we found a way to get to church.

MM: Did it – did you feel like that connected you with the city of Providence in a way that maybe it didn't –

KE: Some what, but I also – once I got a car, I think maybe my sophomore year, we used to drive back to Boston. I used to bring caravans [01:00] back to my home church. Kids used to come here, and then my pastor from Boston used to come down here to talk to kids on campus. And then we were connected with, like, Providence Assembly of God and there was a – something Church of God and Christ; a bunch of us used to go to that church. But we had this explosion – if you'd go back – if you interview anyone else from the class of 1985, there was this strong cohort of some new Christians, recommitted Christians, and I am proud to say, many of them are still involved with ministry. One of them is a pastor right here in Providence. Jeff Williams was, like, involved with our fellowship. There's a bunch of us that are still – [Venoy Harris?] is in ministry; my roommate from junior year, someone who I led to the Lord, her name is Teresa Fernandez Pain, she and I are still best friends. She's a minister in Boston. My husband and I are pastors and part of a bigger church.

So it's been incredible how this momentum – you know, the people who came these radical, on fire for God – that doesn't mean we didn't have fun and we didn't do other stuff – that they still are [02:00] connected to their – you know, their Christian walk. And one of the things that blessed me so was, like I said, I didn't grow up in church, so I was not your typical – as I call them – corny Christian. So I was still funny; I was still a musician; [laughter] I was still an artist, and when people would say, "I've never met a funny Christian. I've never met –" And I was like, oh my God, Christianity gets such a bad rap if you're like, so strict and rigid. I'm like, "No, we like music and we do stuff and we're funny." But that was my pers – that was my experience, but as I met other people, I was like, oh my God. Even my husband, I'm like, oh Lord, what did they do to you? He grew up in church [laughs] and I was like, what happened? Your prayer is just talking to God. It's not –

MM: Did you feel like you were constantly answering those questions on campus from your, like, fellow students?

KE: No, because people had just [already?]. So, it was funny because before I became a Christian, when I was in high school, I was kind of popular – I was pretty popular because I was a musician; I always had a boyfriend, like, for whatever reason. Now I know it's like, well (inaudible) probably because I didn't have a dad, you know, looking for love and [I'd been to the?] wrong places, but I usually was in relationships [03:00] so positive ones, like, long-term. I had two boyfriends for like two years, in high school. Like, that's unheard of. But when I got saved, as they call it, I, like, cut all of that stuff off. I stopped going to parties; I didn't drink – I didn't really drink anyway, so that doesn't count. [laughter] I really didn't. I was too corny before I got – became a – because I didn't smoke; I never smoked. My mother never smoked. I couldn't get around that, you know?

But when I got to campus, you know, I didn't have a boyfriend when I arrived. And people put you in these boxes, so I was seemingly so radical, all this Christian – she's this woman, this really, Jesus freak. So my roommate, freshman roommate, pledged Delta. And I had said to her, “You know what? You're going to change. You're going to get weird.” She says, “No, no I'm not.” And I said, “OK.” And I was like, “I'm not pledging because I pledge [mi-fa-mi?] Alpha and Omega. You know, I don't want to be exclusive. I want to be able to relate to everybody.” She didn't get weird. So in her – her best friend to this day is not a Greek either, so she was pretty [04:00] consistent. But she had to pledge because her sister was and her mother was. Like, I didn't get that whole lineage thing, because like I said, I didn't have family that went to church. So I didn't get that whole, we had to pledge.

So on campus, people looked at me like, you know, that's Katani; she's cool. Because I could sing and I was all right. So they didn't question me so much about, you know, “What's up with you?” They just labeled me. And that hurt my feelings because I'm like, I was cool back in high school. Ya'll don't know; I've got game. Like, so [laughs] then I was like, oh no. What you know about me? I'm not a square. I always had a man. You know? So I played this whole thing up. All right, I'm a Christian, but don't think I don't have swagger, you know? Don't think I don't have game. But – this is going to be so funny when my kids listen to this. [laughter] They're going to be like, oh God, mom. But it's all true. My husband will say it too.

And so, you know, I had various crushes along the way, but – so here comes a crazy segue. After freshman year, my summer of my freshman year, I met this [05:00] young man who I had met in high school. We both played basketball and we were both Christians. And you

know, we became friends and I had never really met an athlete that was serious about, you know, the Lord. And so when I became a Christian and because I'm a singer, a lot of the guys that would talk to me – listen, I have no problems with LGBTQIA, but they seemed very gay. And I'm like, why are they trying to talk to me? Like, I'm more masculine than them. Why are you coming at me? Because I'm a musician? And I just became very disillusioned with this whole Christianity thing, like, why do most of the guys seem so much sweeter than me and why are they so more feminine than I am –

MM: Who were? Other Christians at the time?

KE: At my – yeah – the churches I would see, in Boston. So I'm talking about when I was in high school.

MM: I got it.

KE: Because I had to make that transition from being an athlete then, you know, being a Christian athlete to being also a musician. And the people who would talk to me were – so I'm giving all this background – the prelude as to the lovely man I've been married to now for 33 years plus. So I would meet this guy, he'd be going up to his girlfriend's house or whatever, and I'd be going home. And then after my freshman year, we met and started going to this revival. We just, we got along very well, [06:00] both athletes, both musicians. He played drums. Both were very much like kids. I used to work in, like, teen centers and do stuff with kids. And so but after my freshman year – so we went to college, came back. The summer after my freshman year, he starts liking me hard and I was like, dude, slow down, like, what? But I liked him as well. Long story short, we got engaged sophomore year of college.

MM: No.

KE: Yes. [laughter] Yes. So, yes, so sophomore –

MM: That is commitment.

KE: Yeah. [laughter] So he was like, “Oh, I believe you’re supposed to be my wife.” I was like, “Slow your roll.” And I was like, “We need to use – like, we need to pray about it.” I was like, “But I really like you and I really want to pray about it, because if God says you’re the one, I’m not ready for that.” And if he says no, I really like you, so I want to stay friends. So but he came back, wrote me these love letters, which don’t even exist anymore since e-mail and all that other stuff, but I had real mail that came for me. He went to school in Canada on a basketball scholarship and he sent me all these letters. So by the time he came back at Christmas, I was hardcore in love, like, “Oh yes, yes, yes, yes.” We got engaged. [07:00]

I was engaged for two and half years being at Brown. Now my fiancé was in school in Canada on a basketball scholarship, so I could still live my life. It was fun. Like, he was in another country, you know, and I wasn’t trying to do anything wild anyway. So it was easy. But that was nice for me because I had a man so I didn’t have to feel like, I need to be out here trying to prove that somebody desires me. Because it can be hard I think sometimes if you’re like – especially if you’ve been labeled as this Christian and people are having sex and doing all kinds of stuff, and the first thing out the door I was like, that’s not going to happen. I’m not going down that road. OK, next door. [laughs] You know, so – moving on.

Yeah, because it’s so – so much sexual freedom in college. But here I’m like, and I was like, OK, I’m done with that life. I knew what that was like because I had been sexually active, but my husband and I, we made this commitment, like, you know what? We’re going to hold this thing out. We’re going to hold it down. And we did. It’s hard to believe these days that you actually can be engaged and not have sex, but we did. So we were engaged for two and half years, graduated from Brown on a [08:00] Monday, Memorial Day of 1985. I got married the following Saturday, June first.

MM: Wow, that gives me goose bumps.

KE: It’s crazy. I wouldn’t recommend it, but it’s worked out for us. [laughs]

MM: Did you get married in Providence?

KE: No, we got married in Boston. No, but he – you know, he was here. And there were kind of – we didn't have a lot of money, so it wasn't like a big, fancy wedding. So there wasn't a whole lot I had to be stressed about. I mean, it was the wedding plans, but fortunately I hadn't gone to any of my classmates' weddings. I saw how people get down when they have money. I was like, oh my God. I'm glad I didn't go to their wedding first. I would have felt bad. [laughs] We didn't have money like that. And having it so close together with the graduation, I had plenty of friends who stayed around who could go to my wedding who might have been from out of state. And then like, my grandfather, who came back from Utah, he was here for the graduation and the wedding. My brother, one of them lived in California. So it was like some of the strategic reasons why it made sense to do them so close together since we were going to get married anyway and we had been engaged.

Originally we were going to get married the year before, but I – once I realized that I was not trying to [09:00] leave Brown my senior year, which was going to be the most fun, and move to Canada. No, it was cold there. So I was like, "No buddy, we're going to wait another year. I liked June first, so now it's on a Saturday if we wait another year instead of a Friday." So that's my funny story of how I delayed my marriage.

MM: Well can I ask you a question about the – it's 4:42, so I just want to make sure –

KE: What?

MM: I know.

KE: No! I didn't even get to half the stuff on my list. Go ahead.

MM: Yes, so, I want – so tell us more about what's on your list, if you have highlights.

KE: What did you want to ask me though?

MM: Well, I just wanted to ask about the legacy. So as you then exit Brown University – and you can ignore that and go back to while you're at Brown –

KE: What about it?

MM: The legacy of Brown University or maybe, I don't know, life lessons that you learned here that you carried with you, or maybe the effects of your education on your later life. But please talk about what –

KE: That's OK. So I now work as a high school counselor and as a teacher. I teach Af. Am. Lit and I teach the gospel choir at the high school in Newton. And I love that role. Now, I left here to work in corporate life. Oh man, there's so much else I wanted to say. [10:00] I did not keep good track of time. So anyway, let me say quickly why Dean Ashley's so instrumental, and my husband brought this up recently. So when I came back for my 10th anniversary after leaving Brown, I think I left Brown, worked for Procter & Gamble, had this major job making decent money. My husband became like Mr. Mom because he's like, "If you want to do that whole corporate thing and make a lot of money, I'm going to make sure our kids are stable." And I was like, "OK. I appreciate that."

So when I came back for a 10th reunion – so let's see, if I graduated in '85 – so my '95, I had – I think I had our third child by then. So I've got this baby on my hip and I am, like, feeling like such a failure because a lot of my friends had gotten their MDs. They were doctors; they were lawyers. And I was just like, what did I do with my Brown degree? You know, you feel like, so obligated to do something amazing, whatever that term is by the world's standards. And Dean Ashley changed my life, because when I saw him, I was like, "Oh my God, Dean Ashley, I feel like I didn't do much with my Brown Degree." And he was like, "Katani, if you need me to tell you that you're [10:00] smart enough, you are. If you want to get a masters in – an MBA, you can do that. If you want to go to law school –" He said, "But don't do it because you are trying to prove a point." He said, "Only go back to grad school when you feel there's a reason, you feel the need to go. You don't have to go." And that just freed me up.

And my husband had said to me, he's like, "You need to calm down." He said, "You wait. We come back in 10 years, wait and see how many of your friends wishes they could change places with you." Because when we came back then for the 20th, it was true, because at that point, you know, we're 40, and some of my friends weren't even married then. They were

like, “Oh, I wish I had done it like you.” They wished they – they were just starting to have kids. I was done with that life. I mean, I’m raising my kids but –

MM: They were probably stepping out of careers for a moment –

KE: Yeah. You know, and I took a pause and it was so interesting, but having that perspective, and fortunately my husband was grounded and he wasn’t so much into the whole, “We’ve got to do this thing to prove a point.” And then –

MM: It sounds like your husband has a feminism that was a part of him.

KE: Oh please. Oh, absolutely. I mean, womanism at least. [12:00] He’s kind of like, “You go. You do you.” And then when we had the second kid and he was like, “OK, that was fun the first time.” We started daycare and everything because like, all right, let’s get another plan. [laughter] All right, so. My kids are all four years apart and so I found this job that I didn’t have to have a teaching certification so I started out as a METCO counselor. So I ended up full circle. I didn’t need the certification at the time, but after working in that system for a few years and seeing how the black students were in the low end of the reading levels and all this other stuff, it got me really upset and when an administrator said to me, “Well, everyone knows the Boston kids have lower IQs than the kids from this community.”

And I was like, “rrr,” so I said, oh my God. This is a setup. This is a setup. Self-fulfilling prophecy. If you don’t think they have – and it was like my whole life again, it was like, you won’t get into Brown. It’s like, if you set the kids up early. So then I determined to become a reading teacher, a reading specialist. I said, I want to do something about this and I need to be equipped to do it. Got a card in the mail from somebody who thought I was really bright. [13:00] “Harvard University has a master’s program you should consider.” And I was like, “Harvard? Oh my God. Oh no. I was happy to get into Brown.” [laughs] And I was like, I’d never planned to go back to school. But Harvard had a one-year reading teacher certification, language and literacy specialist, and I applied, got in.

And so now I’ve got the two Ivy League degrees. I’m like, OK, now I know I must be smart. I mean, the first time might have been a fluke [laughter] – yeah, you know, it was like,

OK, I think I'm good now. Even though I kind of thought I was OK by the time I graduated, but so I'm determined to, you know, help empower kids, particularly kids of color, through literacy and I've created programs that incorporate music and literacy. And you know, I'm a singer and I like to do things around education. I work at the House of Blues now. We do a Blues School House, in addition to my job that I work, you know, fulltime, where we take kids through learning about the history of the Blues, so it's – for me, again, it's a God thing, because these jobs are just perfectly tailored to what I like and what I love to do, empowering kids through education and music and helping them to find their passion and [14:00] encouraging students to just do you. Like, don't be – you don't have to go to an Ivy League school to prove that you're smart. It's not about – you know, it's about a match; it's not about proving a point, and I understand that, having gone to an Ivy League school. I mean, there are plenty of brilliant people that go to UMass or various places. It's not about that. It's a funnel. Less people can get in, that's why they're elite. It's not like there aren't enough smart people that you just can't fit, so you're not less smart because you don't get in.

The one thing I wanted to archive was that we had a protest in 1985 and I was very much involved with the protest in that we had to sign this waiver, like, if we get arrested and we had to have an emergency list. And I had already gotten my job at Procter & Gamble, which was the first job that I got offered. I had to keep a company car and a good salary. Remember, I was planning a wedding. I was like –

MM: You're like, "I need this."

KE: – done. P&G, yes, sales, I can do this. I'm a people person. I can talk. I can sell you anything. So we get the job so it was during April of my senior year [15:00] I'm pretty sure and it was funny, because Procter & Gamble said, "Make sure you don't get arrested. Don't do anything stupid." And I was like, "Oh my God. I'm going to do this protest." So I braided my hair in cornrows. I'm like, maybe they don't recognize me if I get arrested. So my roommate, Teresa Fernandez, and I, we were – I think we were in one of those Sayles – one of those places that has no, John Brown Library, something that had the smart – the real poli-sci people knew the brilliant way to do them. We were just like, the worker bees. Where we going? We'll get arrested. We'll do whatever you have –

MM: Set us up a little. What's the background behind –

KE: The background. We wanted to protest for – need blind admissions. We wanted a third world center. So our protest is what got that building over there. We used to be in the basement of Rites and Reason and there was another – there was a third thing, but I knew it was need blind admissions, and probably more African – more faculty of color. And maybe we were trying to establish the Afro-Am studies as a real program, not just a study, as an actual discipline. So we were – I was a part of OUAP, Organization of United African People, and the whole political arm in my junior year were May Ann Arthur. She was very active [16:00] in that and you know. So they created this whole plan, Mark Griffith, and other very politically astute people.

So the part that hurt my heart that I was going to put on the archive – so I was in here, sitting next to a pole with my roommate, because we were ready to get arrested if we had to. We were like, committed, down for the cause, but it doesn't hurt my heart totally because then I remember – I think it might have been [Valerie Hudson?], somebody comes in, they're like, "Katani, they need you outside." I was like, "What are you talking about? I'm protesting. I'm in the – I'm in here. I'm in here."

MM: And where – what building were you in?

KE: We're in – what's the second one to the right of Sayles. What's it called? Tom Brown? The Brown? It has – it has archives in there –

MM: Oh, it's under construction?

KE: I don't know what's there now.

MM: Oh, the John Carter Brown.

KE: That one. So they knew that Brown was not trying to have us acting silly in there because those are irreplaceable archives. So these brilliant people knew that. They're like, "We're going

to sit in there because they're not going to be stupid because they don't want nothing to happen to this stuff." So we were just sitting down in the library, and they were like, "Katani, they need you outside." And I was like, "No, I'm in the protest." So they wanted me to come out and lead songs. So [17:00] I came out and led, like, songs and I was playing on some conga drums because that's also what I have the ability to do, or at least I could.

So you know, I'm in the – I'm taking the – somebody has pictures of me playing the conga. So when it came back around time to acknowledge the people who were involved in that protest, at one point, I saw my name on the list. I was a part of the however many of us sat inside. And so then, a few years later when they contacted Teresa, nobody ever contacted me again, and I was like, "What happened?" And they said, "They took your name off the list because they said you weren't inside, that you were outside." I was like, what? But I signed my name. I was ready to go to jail. But I said, "You know what? I was needed more outside because I'm a singer and I gave my part."

But you know how when you come back, you're like, wait, how are you going to take my name off? I was there like everybody else. So I was like, it's time to get over it. And I have, because –

MM: Who was building the list of names?

KE: I don't remember. I don't even remember, but I remember –

MK: You were Ella Fitzgerald on the steps.

KE: So that was more important. You know, it was more important for me – so I said, you know, (inaudible) get over it. But it's like you – somehow you want to be [18:00] acknowledged that I made the sacrifice. I was ready to go to jail, like, I was in there, and my roommate verifies it. We were sitting next to each other, and then they made me come outside. And the protest didn't even last long, so that's the thing. I'm playing my drums and I'm singing. Oh, and once you leave, you can't go back in. I mean, of course. It's a protest. So they were like, "No, you can't come back." I'm like, "But my stuff is in there." I think I had left my stuff. [laughs]

Because I wasn't sure why they wanted me out there. They were like, "Come outside. We need you to lead a song." And I'm like, "OK." So I went out to lead the freedom songs or whatever and then I'm about to go back in and join the protest and they were like, "No, you can't go back in," by then, security and all that other stuff. So I was like out there like, womp womp. So when they come out with the hands raised, I was like, "But I would have been with them too." Protest of '85.

MM: Well now your name will be in that record –

KE: That's right. I was like, I'm doing this for no other reason. For the record, Katani Eaton, class of '85, was sitting next to Teresa Fernandez on the inside of – what's the library? What's it called?

MM: John Carter Brown.

KE: John Carter Brown. We went – we threw down in John Carter Brown, [laughter] but because I'm a singer, and I had that gift [19:00] and I still do, and I was like, you know, the Bible says your gift will make room for you, and I was definitely needed more so outside leading songs than sitting my butt down inside the library. So I will happily end on that note.

MM: I would recommend that if you – yeah, if anyone has other archival pieces of evidence of that event, that –

KE: Oh, there must be. They're still writing those – there's something. I think there was a like a plaque or something up in the Third World Center now, that's why I know my name's not on it. I was just like, get over it. It's all right. God knows – God knows you were there. Terry knows you were there. But to me, for someone to take my name – it's like, someone had to actively say, "No, no. She wasn't inside, because she was outside." But I'm like –

MM: Like think about it, yeah.

KE: – no. But I was inside, but you all dragged me outside because you wanted me to sing. So I was like, I get it. I get what they're – maybe they're like, "Well, we remember you outside," because there's probably a picture of me outside playing the drums or something like that. So someone might have just been like, without asking, to say, "Why was your name on there, because you clearly were outside." No but, because I was on the inside. And there was [20:00] a group of us who agreed that if we had to get arrested, we could get arrested. I'm glad we didn't get arrested because I might have not gotten that job because they said, "Don't get arrested." But anyway, yes –

MM: Did you have a question?

MK: Yeah, do you remember what songs you sang?

KE: I do not. I don't remember, but you know, the funniest thing, full circle, I was blessed to go to the Obama inauguration and it was freezing. And so we're outside waiting, and I was with one of my lovely, affluent white friends who got the tickets for us because she's a friend with a senator who didn't want to go because he's a Republican from Texas. He couldn't – take my tickets.

MM: Oh really?

KE: But anyway, he had to go as a senator, but he gave away his – I guess they all got, like, ten tickets or something, 20 tickets of actual seats. So we are out in the freezing cold in DC, like, five or six in the morning. And my friend went to get hot chocolate, and because I'm a choir director and I just do that kind of stuff, I said, "You know, if we're out here freezing, why don't we just sing?" So I stood up on a bench and I remember singing, "If I had a hammer," I had everybody singing, "I'd hammer in the morning." And then we'd sing "This little light [21:00] of mine." And she comes back with the cocoa and she's like, "What just happened?"

Like [laughs] and I know somewhere in the country there's somebody with a video. Because it was hundreds of people that were just, like, singing. And she's like, "Only you, Katani, only you." And it's just like, you know what, why not? If you can do it, do it. So that

was, you know, '08, or '09, the inauguration and that reinforces for me, you need to go where your gift takes you. You know, sometimes you have a certain talent or a gift, so don't be – don't feel sad that your name's not on the plaque or whatever it is, because people will remember that I was outside singing. Somebody probably remembers what we were singing. I don't remember. But I know at the Obama inauguration I was singing, "If I had a hammer." And these young people did not know the song. It was so funny.

You know, why would they? And I'm just like, "Come on, just repeat after me: this little light of mine," or whatever. So I'm happy that I'm singing this weekend, you know, Black Alumni Reunion, singing here, singing at the service on Sunday. Still strong in my faith [22:00] and we actually – on the archive you can state – we have a Brown Alumni prayer conference call on Sunday night. We pray for current students at Brown now. So and two years ago, we came on campus and we walked the campus and prayed and, like, anointed tops of – we went down where my dorm was; we split up the campus so, you know, we're believing for there to be another spiritual revival on campus, because we know it's necessary.

You know, I tell my students now, "You've got to take care of your mind, body, and soul, or else you're not going to make it. You need balance." And so often students – my high school students focus on the academics. The academics and your brain, it's going to explode if you don't take care of your body, if you don't stay hydrated, if you don't find peace, whether through prayer or music or art or all of the above. It's not healthy. And you know, I'm 55 now. You learn that lesson, hopefully sooner versus later. I had hypertension; I had to learn how to meditate, just – I plan on being here for a long time, again, to see my grandchildren that are not born yet that are going to listen to this tape at some point. You know, I want to be alive and healthy and well. [23:00] So thanks for listening you guys. That was my main thing, the '85 protest. [laughs]

MM: Thank you so much for joining us today.

MK: Yeah, thank you so much.

KE: Thank you. Wow.

MM: Taking the time and sharing your life with us for just even a little bit. Really appreciated it.
I'm going to turn off the recording now.

- END -