

**University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives**  
**Delta Sigma Theta Oral History Project**  
**Interviewee: Beverly Effort Biggs**  
**Interviewer: Anna Trammell, Student Life and Culture Archives**  
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**Anna Trammell: My name's Anna Trammell and I'm with the Student Life and Culture Archives at the University of Illinois, and today is May 22, 2018, and I'm here in the Illini Union speaking with Beverly Effort Biggs about her time as a student at the University of Illinois and as a member of Delta Sigma Theta sorority Incorporated's Alpha Nu chapter. So I'd like to start off by just asking you a bit about how you ended up at the U of I. How did you decide to attend here?**

Beverly Effort Biggs: Well I grew up in Chicago, and when I thought about going to college there, where not a lot of options that we entertained, my teachers at my high school who were very committed to sending as many students to college as possible, encouraged us to apply to the U of I in Champaign-Urbana, and it was the only college I applied to, and I was accepted and started there in 1961, which is very different than my own children who applied to half a dozen colleges. We didn't – I didn't feel, my parents didn't feel like there were a lot of options, that was the one we could afford, more than any other, yes.

**Trammell: So can you describe a little bit about your time at the U of I? When did you arrive, what did you study, what was campus like at that time?**

Biggs: Well it was certainly very different than what I was used to, I mean I had gone to an all black elementary school, high school, lived in an all-black neighborhood, and so coming to the U of I, where we were in the serious minority at the time, I didn't realize there were so few of us, only 200 students I guess, African-American students, black students we called ourselves. So it was very different. I lived in Champaign which was what was considered at that time the men's campus, and because there wasn't room in Urbana, and it had been a men's dorm, and there were three students of color in that dorm, and we were all three in the same room. And the bathrooms all said men. And, you know, I had been mentored closely by my high school instructors, my parents were very loving and always supportive, and so I didn't – even though we were in a serious minority, it didn't bother me so much because I always felt confident. They gave me a sense of confidence that you can do whatever you need to do as long as you work hard. And I was quite young, I was only sixteen starting college, yeah. It's ridiculous when I think about it now, but I was only sixteen. And so even though we were in a sea of white faces, we found our social world of black students and that is where – that's where we socialized, and so it didn't – so we created our own world, right within this bigger world, we had our own microcosm right there.

**Trammell: And so as you mentioned, there were only 200 black students on campus out of 24,000 students at that time, so can you talk a little bit more about what that experience was like, how you found – how you built community, how you found mentors on campus?**

Biggs: Well I think I – if I had been a little older and a little bit more mature and had more experience, I thought probably would have found more mentors, I really kept within that small nucleus of students, in fact, and I think in a way it worked to my detriment because I could have probably found more funding, and as a result of not finding funding, I went back to Chicago, spent my sophomore year at Navy Pier, which was the... which was, is now University of Illinois Chicago. And that way I could live at home, and I did find mentors then who encouraged me to think about what I really wanted to do, and I was a little older then. So I didn't, I didn't although other members of my sorority did, find mentors, but I think where I found...encouragement, and where I found a sense of belonging is when I came back my junior year and joined the sorority. And it really was, and is, a sisterhood. I mean, even after all these many years, here we are back together, and over the years we've seen each other, you know, in whatever city someone wanted to host us, that's where we've gone. And...we established a scholarship in the name of one of our sorority sisters who was killed in a bus accident in – she was on a Fullbright, I think, in an African country, I think Nigeria, I'm not sure which, but when she died it gave us – we started to think about our own mortality, and our own history and the fact that we needed to do – we needed to think about how to be mentors going forward. I think [cough] I think that would have been about 1990, maybe a little bit before. And so we established a scholarship in her name. But, it was...it was by the time I was eighteen my junior year that I did reach out to instructors...and again, the sorority and that is really, I think...gave me more of a sense of, of confidence, because I think the confidence that I had when I came as a freshman was a kind of naïveté, and not realizing how big the world was and how much I needed to put myself out in what I needed to do, but by the time I was eighteen and a little bit more experienced I knew I had to reach out and get further support.

**Trammell: So you spent your sophomore year at Navy Pier –**

Biggs: Right.

**Trammell: And when you came back you decided to get involved with Delta Sigma Theta incorporated. How did you make that decision? Did you know people who were already involved in Greek life on campus or was that something that you wanted to do when you began at U of I?**

Biggs: Well when I was here as a freshman, I had gone to some of the rush...and then only two sororities at that time, Alpha Kappa Alpha and Delta Sigma Theta. But I wasn't – I knew I wasn't ready to participate in the sorority at that time. But when I came back, my good long-time friend, Betty Bouldon, had pledged the year before and she and I have known each other since we were ten years old, we went to elementary school and high school together, our mothers were friends. And she had pledged so she was a member already and she said, why don't you think about this? And so as I met other people in the sorority, I knew that that was the one I wanted to join. So I did know someone in the sorority.

**Trammell: So can you describe a little bit more about your experience during your junior and senior year being involved with Delta Sigma Theta and what that meant and maybe some events or really memorable moments in those two years?**

Biggs: Sure. Well, pledging at that time was, was, how shall I say, a little bit more rigorous: there was a longer pledge time than there is now, there are many more guidelines about what you can and cannot do. I mean there was nothing done to harm us physically or to shame us or to humiliate us...a lot of what was done was – or I should say what we participated in was building a sense of comradeship of sisterhood, so we had imposed study hours, and that meant that you couldn't be out with your boyfriend if you had a boyfriend, and if someone in the sorority saw you out with your boyfriend, not only did you have to go on social probation but everybody on your pledge line had to go on social probation. And of course we had to learn the history of the sorority and we had to participate in the service project that was – I think that was one of the real appeals to me of Delta Sigma Theta is that service has always been part of its story. It was founded – that's its foundation. So...I studied much harder then, I knew by then that I just needed to apply myself more. Again, I was so much more mature and I knew I needed to do that. We – part of Greek life was parties that were given by the sorority or fraternities or all combined, and so we wrote songs that reflected that, our participation – I wrote one to the tune of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow."

**Trammell: Can you sing a little bit of it? Do you remember?**

Biggs: I do. [Clears throat and begins singing] Somewhere over those burning [?] lies – lies Delta land, as we strive to be Deltas we'll all walk hand in hand. Somewhere over those burning [?], skies are blue, and the dreams that we dare to dream really do come true. [No longer singing] And so we all learned that song and it's become part of our repertoire of songs that we sing when we get together, in fact, later today when, just spontaneously someone will start singing and that will be one of those. What else do I remember about that time...and all the while, we were enjoying...Greek life, as it were, there was a growing awareness of the importance of – of the Civil Rights Movement and the role it was playing in our lives. This was the sixties, and we already had *Brown versus Board of Education*, we already had the Montgomery Bus Boycott, but Lyndon Johnson was shortly – oh, I'll never forget that, before he was President, in 1963, I was working at the student Union, and we got the word that President Kennedy had been shot and killed. And I remember students sitting on the floor, lining all the walls of the Union, hand in hand, tears just flowing. Absolutely flowing. 'Cause we were just devastated that this man, that many of us revered, had been shot and killed, and of course we didn't know what else was happening along with that. But shortly after that, of course Lyndon Johnson became President and he was the one who signed the Civil Rights Act of 1965, maybe 1964. And so we were caught up in that, I mean some of our sorority sisters were picketing here for fair housing, they were jailed, their pictures were in the Daily Illini, I don't think I was – I think I might have been picketing with them, and then a couple of us went away to get food and when we came back the rest of us were already arrested. So, but at the same time...as Greeks, we had that in common, but our blackness was so important to us, and so that was the year we began conversation of the BSA, the Black Students Association, and that was the year that that was founded. So I remember that time well. What else do I remember...Well, I had met my husband in Chicago, and – my future husband – and he had already has a master's degree and was teaching at a city college, but he would come down on weekends to see me, and I tell him to this day the reason he and I got together 'cause he loved being on college campuses, I mean he had gone to the

University of Wisconsin and he had played basketball there. But he loved being on college campuses, and he does to this day for that matter. But he would come down occasionally on weekends and so all of my sorority sisters know my husband because that is...you know, that's when we were first courting, so to speak, and of course when I graduated and went back to Chicago is when he decided to go to law school back up in the University of Wisconsin, so we weren't in the same town for many years, and then when he graduated law school and came back to Chicago is when we married. We'll celebrate our 50th wedding anniversary next year.

**Trammell: Congratulations!**

Biggs: Thank you. So what else do I remember about that time – but I just remember laughing so much, being with each other, you know, our sorority meetings, we didn't have a house but we met here in the Union. We wore – we always wore dark skirts and I think blue blouses or I think something like that – but it was really the beginning of a sisterhood and every – of the people who were here, many of them we just kept in touch even though we live all over the country, what we know is that we could call up any one of those people at any time and if we needed something – and this has happened – someone will be there to support you and give you what you need, and if they can't they know how to get help, get what you need.

**Trammell: Can you talk about some of the non-academic lessons that you learned while you were a student that really informed your life after graduation?**

Biggs: I think...certainly, the importance of working hard. And I don't know that I didn't know that already, but it just sort of became more in focus during that time that I had to learn to focus and put the social things out of my head and carve out time just to focus on work. And that – that put me in good stead, and to this day it puts me in good stead. And I think there's a fair amount of data that shows – and I know this with my own students that hard work trumps brains, it really does, it's nice to have brains but the people who really succeed in life are the ones who work hard. So I think that was a non-academic lesson. I think the importance of courage, I tell people all the time, you know, whenever you need to...an important aspect of succeeding is courage, sometimes when you just feel like you can't do something, you just figure out how to muster up some courage and some confidence and go forward. I think civility is extremely important, and I actually found a book a few years back that I bought for every one of my faculty, and it's called *Choosing Civility*, and the first lesson which, believe it or not, says "pay attention." The first lessons of civility are to pay attention, because nothing good ever happened if someone wasn't first paying attention, and the second is listening, listening carefully. I mean there's a whole bunch of things after that, but those, those are some things I think had – I had maybe unconsciously or subconsciously learned, and then this particular author gave words to what I was thinking, yeah, so I think those are some lessons I learned. Working hard, having courage, initiative, but also civility.

**Trammell: What do you think the sorority should focus on over the next few years?**

Biggs: Well, this past election has brought home to me the importance of the electoral process, and I know our sorority does not want to be especially political, but I don't think we can stand by and watch our country go down the tubes and – I mean this man should never have been elected,

I mean he lost the election really by a million votes, but the electoral college needs to be overhauled, and there is a – what’s interesting is built into the Constitution is a process to change that, all you need is fifty percent of the states to agree that elections will be won by the popular vote, and so I would like to focus on that because I see all of the amazing work, amazing work that President Obama did being undone. I see our country having lost any moral high ground we might have had being undone, and being...thrown out the window by this terrible person. So I would like to see us focus on that. Certainly the hashtag Me Too Movement is an important one as well. I think one that we do focus on and should continue to focus on is, is...movements around Black Lives Matter and making sure...children have equal opportunity for educational experiences. I think that would keep us pretty busy, those kinds of things.

**Trammell: What is the most important advice you would give to a young black woman who wants to be effective and relevant in today’s world?**

Biggs: Well I think some of, some of...what we’ve talked about already, but Robert Frost has his poem, and in it there is a line that says choose your passionate preference, something that you’re passionate about and good at, and spend time developing that, and, you know, I always wanna say go to college, but more and more I’m thinking that there is – there are other paths that you don’t have to take although I would never tell anybody not to go to college. But find your passionate preference, work hard at that...I would say...learn another language, I wouldn’t care which it was, I mean some people would say China’s – Chinese or Spanish, but I don’t think it matters, just learn another language, learn another culture. Travel the world, as much as you can, and make sure you have some balance in your life so that your life is not all work, I mean I understand the importance of working hard and having that work everybody needs, everybody needs work, but have some other interests, it can be a family of your own with husband and children or not...but something else you can do well whether it’s playing a musical instrument or being a great cook or something other than your work, something to take you out of your work once the – once your day is over. Those would be my advice, that would be my advice.

**Trammell: Well that’s all the time we have, thank you so much for speaking to me today.**

Biggs: Oh, you’re very welcome, it was my pleasure, was so helpful to have these questions ahead of time, give me something to think about...let me sign that.