

University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives
Project 500 Oral History Project
Interviewee: Jeffrey Roberts
Interviewer: Bethany Anderson
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Bethany Anderson: Hello. I'm Bethany Anderson from the University of Illinois Archives, and I'm here today with Jeffrey Roberts. Today is September 28, 2018. Thank you so much for being here with me today, Jeffrey. So we're gonna go ahead and get started, but I first wanted to give you the opportunity to introduce yourself, say anything about yourself that you'd like to share.

Jeffrey Roberts: I'm Jeffrey Roberts. I came to University of Illinois as a freshman September of 1968. I finished in the College of Communications, journalism major in 1972, going on to various careers. Currently, I am the owner, co-owner, with my spouse of an insurance—successful insurance agency in Chicago for the last 20 years.

BA: Alright, great. Well, thank you, Jeffrey. Um, so you mentioned you came here in 1968. When did you graduate from the U of I?

JR: I graduated in the spring of 1972, out of the College of Communications, journalism major. The College of Communications you could not get into until you were a junior. You did your first two years in Liberal Arts and Sciences. But I knew coming on campus I wanted to major in journalism. The way that came about, I showed you a photo of my—some sports activity. I was a bat boy for the Chicago White Sox in 1966. It was a contest, I won a writing contest in which 10,000 boys applied or wrote essays as to why they wanted to be a bat boy for the Chicago White Sox. I was one of six that won that contest and successfully spent the summer with the Chicago White Sox.

Well, that summer, I found out very quickly that my athletic abilities were limited to playing professional baseball. But I met some great journalists, sports journalists. Brent Musburger, who went on to be a famous journalist. He was a local journalist out of Chicago at the time, and there were journalists like that that covered the Chicago White Sox at the time, and in conversations with them, I knew I wanted to be a writer. At my high school, I was on the school newspaper, and I was the editor of an underground newspaper that was sort of an anti-administration newspaper that I was the editor of.

And my English teacher kind of knew all of this, and she—I knew in 1968 I was going to college. My—I'm from a large family. Everyone in the family had gone on to college, but local colleges in Chicago. At the time, it was called Chicago Teachers College, which is now Chicago State University. But if you were going to be a school teacher in Chicago, more than likely you went to Chicago Teachers College. And all my family had gone there. One of my older brothers had gone to Roosevelt University. But I

knew I was going on to college. I didn't know where. So my English teacher talked to my mom in particular, and said, 'University of Illinois has one of the best journalism schools in the country, and Jeffrey would be a perfect fit for that.' So she bugged my mother about me filling out the application to come to school here. We didn't have any money, so my dad's position was, 'You can go wherever you want. You just got to figure out how to pay for it.' I grew up in public housing in Chicago. So it was, 'You can go wherever you think you could go, but the money has to be there.'

At the same time, University of Illinois had just began this special Educational Opportunities Program, also known as Project 500. So a group of us were invited to come down to the university for spring break in 1968. Now you gotta remember, this is when Dr. King just got killed, and the Democratic Convention was getting ready to happen in Chicago. So you had all this stuff going on around the city of Chicago in particular. So with all that in mind, I came down here in April of 1968 to visit the campus. And in my mind, it was just the next step in terms of what I was going to do educationally. Came on campus.

Shortly after I visited here, I got an acceptance letter from the University and my financial aid package. The financial aid package said, well, I need—my parents need to contribute \$500, whatever the amount was, it was not a lot of money that needed to be contributed on my end. So I successfully got a summer job and earned the money. And come September 1968 my oldest brother dropped me at Union Station. Actually, it was a sub depot for Union Station downtown Chicago. I had everything I owned in two suitcases and on down to Champaign. [Laughs.]

And that's how I, you know. I knew I was going to major in journalism. It was just a matter of getting over, getting the grades. I was never afraid of the university academically. I knew I could perform academically. But I was 17 years old. So I say today to a lot of young people I know, that was probably the most intimidating, being here at 17 because everybody else was much older. And try dating when you're 17 years old, [laughs] because all the girls are 19 to 20. So that was the challenge.

BA: Yeah [laughs]. So what was the climate like when you arrived on campus?

JR: It was a subset of what was going on nationally. So there was a lot of racial tension. No question about it. Many of the students, including myself, had a real activist background in city of Chicago or whatever city they were from. So there was a lot of racial tension. You had the Vietnam War going on. There were war protests on campus every other day. You had the hippies and all these, you know, individuals on campus with their protests. So it was a very activist scenario on campus itself. So it was really easy to get involved. I was, [laughs] I was not elected, but sort of pushed forward, as the student representative, the student leader from Project 500. So the Black Student Association, I was the freshman that sat in on all the meetings that—all the executive meetings right here in the Student Union. I sat in on all the meetings to represent the voice of those 500.

BA: Yeah. Well, since you got here in 1968, I wanted to ask you if you participated in the September 10, 1968 sit-in. And—

JR: Well I had a very unique seat for that particular evening, because, as I mentioned, I was the student that sat in representing the Project 500 students. So I was here on the second floor of the Illini Union and the BSA Black Student Association office, with the leadership that is all in all documents such as David Addison [Eisenman?] and all the individuals that were there. I was the student voice that was in those meetings. So I sat in on all the executive meetings. So with the—as it built up to the rest that evening, I was in on all the executive meetings from the executives from the University coming in, saying what they was and was not gonna do. I got a firsthand seat in terms of all the things that went on that particular evening.

I was arrested. Which, interesting, I have documents from that particular arrest, because the university was going to—all of our cases, the 275, whatever the number was, all of our cases went to the University disciplinary board. And I still have the documents from that, which was, I guess it was like a letter of reprimand, winning your records, or something like that. But the University never took any direct action against me as an individual. One document that I have, I was—my parents had to sign a letter for the attorney that was representing the Project 500 students that were arrested, for them to represent me, since I was a minor. So, and then my neighbors had to witness it, and they never looked at me in any disparaging way. They were proud of what I was involved in. They were like, 'Just keep up the good work and get good grades.'

By the way, all the time I was here—back then, the University used to send freshman grades to your old high school. I had to go up to my old high school for some reason, and I walked in the office where the teachers are, and they were all beaming and congratulations. I didn't know what they were talking about. They had seen my first-year grades, and I went on to be a James Scholar, so they were very proud of me academically.

BA: That's great. Wow. So you already mentioned this, you know, involvement that you had and sitting on executive meetings and so forth. Were you involved in any other student organizations? And you know, you mentioned the Black Student Association.

JR: Yes. I was very active in the Black Student Association. I, as a journalism student, went on to write for *The Daily Illini*. I was a beat reporter covering basically whatever Blacks were doing. Then I had a column, and it was called Black Vibrations, that was published every Friday. And I look back on those columns now and said, 'Man, I was writing at that level back then.' [Laughs.] The discipline involved was tremendous. To produce that column every week was a lot of pressure, but I did it, and so I was very active.

I was the founder and the editor of the Black student yearbook that was published in 1972. And we had told the Black deans here at the University that we were going to produce this book. We knew we had the talent to do it, but we had absolutely no resources. So we put together a committee, some of which you've interviewed already, and they became the staff. So I knew I could pull all this together just from my experience out of journalism school. I knew what to do. I didn't have any resources to do this, plus, I was a student full time. But the journalism professors all knew what I was doing, so they were—I remember one professor in particular told me, 'Just keep up with the syllabus and keep up, you know, with the with the readings, and you'll be fine in class. Don't worry if you miss a class, okay, I know what you're doing.' And I remember I didn't have time. I had all the materials for the yearbook, but I didn't have time to put together the document itself. I went home during the Christmas break. School was out for a week, and I came back December 27 and I spent the week here, basically in the BSA office, just working on that book. Putting that yearbook together. And putting all the layouts and everything together to produce that particular document.

So on campus, like everybody kind of knew me for my writings, and one of the reasons I wanted to show you that picture of the story of the bat boy, also: one of the other guys that was a bat boy with me, he was president of a group called Young Americans for Freedom. Young Americans for Freedom was the extremely conservative Republican group on campus, and I was sitting in the Union one day, having lunch with him. And one of the gossip columnists for *The Daily Illini* said, 'Strange bedfellows. Jeffrey Roberts from BSA and this person from Young Americans for Freedom were sitting and having lunch in the Union. What was that about?' Well, we never talked politics. We talked about baseball because he had been a bat boy with me also, and he just happened to end up here at school, and we had remained friends when we were students.

BA: Oh, wow, great. [Laughs.] So you already talked about some of these, you know, editorial activities you were involved in, and were there any sports you were involved in, or any other sorts of art, arts or, you know, extra—

JR: It was funny, the cultural center—I was involved in, the Black Cultural Center from the aspect of the political side of the cultural center. The cultural center, for me, was a safe haven. It was a place—they had this great stereo system. [Laughs.] Culturally, coming to the University of Illinois, you had no—the biggest shock was the cultural shock, because there was no music, there was no anything that you can relate to. The only radio—WPGU at that time did not have a format that was diverse. So the only radio station that you could pick up here in Champaign was WLS, and they only had several Black artists that would come on in their format. So the cultural center had this wonderful album collection and this wonderful stereo system, and I used to just go over there and listen to music. So that was sort of my escape.

I didn't get that involved in the operational aspect of the cultural center, or participating in any of the programs. One of my roommates was a—conned me one time into playing conga drums as part of a

group that he had. He said, 'Okay, you be part of the rhythm section. You can do that.' I said, 'Okay, I can keep the rhythm.' [Laughs.] So, you know, but the cultural, you know, that type of thing, I didn't. But as related to the politics of the cultural center, I was very active or very vocal in my column regarding the University needed to step up its support of that Black Cultural Center.

BA: Mm-hmm. Wow. So what were some of your favorite memories from your time here?

JR: It's so funny. When you're 17 to 21 years old, some of the things that you reflect back had nothing to do with the University. Dating. You know, asking someone to go on a date. [Laughs.] That was tough. [They laugh.] You know, asking somebody to go to the show. or to come up to the Union and go bowling with you. So those types—it was the type of things that I remember, that a young person would go through, whether they were, regardless of race. Those are the things that I remember closely.

Yeah, I remember, you know, the closeness of the Black student body. I remember going to parties, and I was—I went to all the parties, but I was the one that would leave early because I needed to get up the next day and study. I used to—I had some weird—I lived off campus. I only lived in the dormitory my freshman year. After that, I lived off campus, and since I was active in the Black Student Association, I had 24-hour access to the Student Union. So six, seven o'clock in the morning, I would walk—my apartment was right off First and Green—I would walk up to the Union, get some coffee and go to the Black Student Association office on the weekend, Saturday and Sunday, and study four or five hours. And where everybody else was sleep or trying to get their self together from the party the night before. So it was things like that that I remember.

The journalism school was very helpful in terms of, there wasn't any assistance in terms of jobs when I left the university, but people that knew me from my—people who knew me for my writing and my political activities were very helpful in getting me a job, helping me get a job in Springfield for the Democratic Party, on the staff of the Democratic Party when I left Champaign. So I went there for a year, and then I went to work for a US Congressman as his press secretary in Chicago. And so everything sort of came together at once, you know, but a lot of good recommendations from the University and individuals who headed up programs, administrators, professors that I had. Those really helped.

BA: Yeah, wow. So I wanted to ask you, you know, kind of going back to that sit-in on September 10, 1968 and thinking about things today, do you think protest tactics, philosophies, and so forth related to Project 500 differ from those used in other protests at the time, or even protests that are happening today?

JR: They weren't different. The tactics used weren't different from tactics used at the time. Now, today, we're talking about a different environment, because everything is done via social media, and social

media is the mover of things, and people having blogs, and so that's—so it's a different era. Even the issues are different.

But, you know, it's funny, one of the issues that I think is on the table this weekend is, why has the University has such a hard time recruiting Black students to the University? And one of my jobs I spent in Chicago, I was in the human resources department of a major bank in Chicago. I was the affirmative action manager, and I was responsible for coming up with the goals and plans for what the bank was going to do. And I always believe that once you make the commitment, you go do it. It's no mystery to it. There's no science to it. Once you say we're going to do this, it's just like building a building. Once you decide that it's going to be done, you go do it. And I just don't think the commitment has been there to do this.

And so the one thing with my life right now, my position is, I can't beat you to death to make you do this if you don't feel that it's the right commitment to make, well, let's move on. And that's where I am with the University. I can celebrate what happened in the past. You know the history just as well as I do. And in terms of the future, it's a question of, what does the University want to do? And once you make that commitment to get this done, you'll put your full weight and support behind it, and you'll make it happen.

BA: Yeah. So reflecting on your experience here as a student and where you— where that led you in life. What sort of advice do you have for incoming students, incoming freshmen, rather, and graduating seniors?

JR: Study hard. Be clear about who you are. Follow a path that—you know the difference between right and wrong. And there's plenty of outlets here to get help. If you need help, reach out. Don't become a loner. Reach out. Talk to people. Let people know what's—because it's a lot of caring people around, but they don't know you need help if you don't say anything. So step up to the plate. Go talk to people. Don't feel like you're pestering them. You know, whether it's a professor in the class, whether it's an administrator at Student Services. Whoever it is, reach out to them. Don't go in your room and put your covers over your head and act like things don't exist. That's not the way to go. A closed mouth gets no help. That's just the way it is.

For seniors, follow your passions. Don't worry about following the money. Everybody's, 'Oh, what, how much are you getting paid when you leave the University?' I've had a lot of great paying jobs that I hated. [They laugh.] So follow your passion, because if you follow your passion, you'll do something really, really meaningful, and you'll make the money. Things will come. So, and don't think everything is going to be easy. Everything is just going to be laid out for you, because there are going to be a lot of challenges. You're gonna get knocked down a lot. That's life. The question is not that you got knocked down, it's what did you do to get up? And that's really what this is all about. And, if you do that, you'll do well.

BA: That's great advice. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

JR: It is really interesting being back on campus. I've been back for different things over the last 50 years. I was founder and president—first president of the Black Students, Black Alumni Association. So I've been around campus for a couple times. There's so much going on here. From the buildings looking different. [They laugh.] Every—the Student Union looks the same, but everything else, you know, you see all the progress that's being made. And I just enjoy being around young folks.

And I think if I was a professor here, and I think back to some of the best professors I had, the challenge wasn't so much about—I'm thinking, I was, since I was a James Scholar, I had to take an honors class or a graduate level class. In my junior year, I took a graduate level class in history, and I got an A in it. And the following semester, I took the same professor, and for the midterm, he read my paper, and he called me and asked me to come to his office. So I went to his office. He says, 'We got two ways of handling this. I can grade this paper and you can go with that grade, or you can retake the test.' He says, 'Because I know you well enough, this isn't your best work.' So I opted to retake the test, and I did what—I got a B taking the graduate level course, but I remember professors like that who challenged me in the journalism school. He's deceased now; a professor named Martin Gershon. He wrote a book about the My Lai incident in Vietnam. He called me into his office one day, and he said I was the only Black student in the journalism program, and he says, 'Don't worry about these other students, because I read all the papers and you can write way better than these other students.'

So I remember things like that, and which—just encouragement. And I think if I was an administrator, a professor, that's where I would—I would spend a lot of times with students, just reaching out, and getting to know people, individually. And just getting to know—because that's, you know, when it really comes down to it, I own a business, and it's important that I know my employees. It's not so much just your job performance, because your job performance is being impacted by other things, who you are. And sometimes, just a talk with the person, not a scolding, but just sitting down over lunch and letting them have a conversation with you can move people forward, and I think that's important here.

BA: Yeah, definitely. Well, thank you so much, Jeffrey, for talking with me today. I really appreciate your time.

JR: You're welcome.