

University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives
Delta Sigma Theta Oral History Project
Interviewee: Eleanor Saunders Towns
Interviewer: Anna Trammell, Student Life and Culture Archives
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Anna Trammell: My name's Anna Trammell from the Student Life and Culture Archives here at the University of Illinois. Today is May 22, 2018, and I'm here in the Illini Union speaking with Eleanor Saunders Towns 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 begin just by hearing a little about how you arrived at the U of I. How did you decide to come here?

Eleanor Saunders Towns: Well that's kind of interesting because I had been, I had applied to Howard University. And it was June or May – time was getting short, and I had not heard back from them. So I called the registrar's office and they could find no record of my application, and I talked to the dean of girls at West Rockford High School, who was in touch with Dean Miriam Sheldon. And they worked it out that I was accepted here. And so I was able to get here, you know all the arrangements made over the summer. I came here on full scholarship from not the university but a subsidiary of Shell Oil, Smith Oil, based in Rockford, Illinois. Mrs. Frances Smith Schafer used to work in South Rockford which is where the black community was, and she came into contact with my father, who was also a newspaper editor of the African American newspaper, and a community activist. And so she said, "Well Joe, where's your daughter gonna go to school?" Because I had been very active in high school, American Field Service exchange student, just you know, a ton of things. And he said, "I don't know." And so the Smith family developed a scholarship for an African American student going to the University of Illinois [laughter].

Trammell: That's amazing!

Towns: Yeah, we didn't have any money so when I finished here, I wrote the head of the company and said "I've gotten my degree, and my intent is to pay you back. I have a job as a teacher so I will pay you \$50 a month." What did I know about tax write-offs? [Laughter] They said, "get out of here, just go." In today's parlance they would have said pay it forward with some other kids, which I have tried very hard to do.

Trammell: So you decided to come to the University of Illinois, can you describe arriving here, what year was that, what did you decide to study?

Towns: I came in 1961. I had been active in high school as a debater. We'd been state champion debaters and also Northwestern University, I got the year of that tournament top speaker award, so I was interested in teaching of speech, drama, that kind of thing.

Trammell: Okay, great. So how did being one of around 200 black students on a campus of 24,000 students impact your student experience?

Towns: I think I probably was better able to adjust to it than a lot of students. West Rockford High School, very large high school. There were two high schools, there was the Rock River, the West Rockford High School and the East Rockford High School. Our class of graduates had

38 black students out of a class of nearly 750 in that class. So it wasn't different to me, I was not accustomed to being in the majority. Of course on Sunday morning everybody went their separate ways, community activities were separate. But during the day we interacted as students. I tell people now, I went to integrated schools all my life. So that was not a major adjustment to me, I was not lost, I was accustomed to competing, not just with white students but I had learned by observation to observe successful white male students and to emulate some of that behavior. It served me well because throughout my life, because there's no place that I know – well there are places where I would have been amongst the majority but career-wise I went to the feds, I worked for the US force service, which was very non-traditional, and that situation continued and so those skills, those subtleties, those sensitivities to how to interact with the bigger world served me very well. 'Cause my dad had taught me, very young age, my dad and the church, you can be anything you want to work hard enough to be. And you are as smart as anyone on this planet. And from the time we were little that was just drilled into us, and at a very early age in that church we would have public speaking opportunities within the church. And that's a critical skill for your self-confidence.

Trammell: So while you were a student, did you seek counsel and support, did you have mentors on campus?

Towns: The only – there were two sources of support. One became the sorority. Because there was no black student curriculum or anything else, there were 200 of us each. The athletes had just started going to the historically black colleges and university [?] schools to recruit. There were no black football – very few black football players that had just started coming in, basketball players. So we didn't have any structured place. Older students kind of took us on. The sorority provided a lot of comfort and support. And the other place was, again, dean Sheldon. And I want to say that because I understand that there was a project by [?] I don't know her exact name. But this was a woman before her time, possibly without direction from the university or necessarily even support, took it upon herself to find us and ask, she knew many of us by name, how you doin? Well I was president of freshman board, so that gave me a direct feed into her, but she followed us. She – I know she looked at grades. And she took a personal interest in us, in the early 60s, for which I remain very grateful. She is, by the way, a member of the sorority. She was made an honorary Delta by the national convention, and it turns out that she and Dr. Jean Noble, one of the past presidents responsible for moving us from the social emphasis to the service emphasis, was her roommate in graduate school, New York University or wherever they were.

Trammell: Okay, interesting. So what year did you join the Alpha Nu chapter, and what made you decide to seek membership with the Delta Sigma Theta sorority incorporated?

Towns: I was at – I know this very well was my birthday, March 16, 1943. And why Delta, well when you're young you have – well even old folks have these stereotypes about things that are probably most of them have no basis in reality, but I gravitated toward the Deltas because at that point in time I felt they had more emphasis on scholarship. And so that was why. Though interesting, I went through rush, you know, 76 Greek organizations here. That was probably the heyday of Greekdom at the University. Tri-Delt brought in their regional or somebody, people to look at me. I never considered it, 'cause I didn't wish to isolate myself. I mean, you know, you go through enough trying to be all things to all people without complicating your life, removing yourself from what might be [?]. Plus, the hormones, raging.

Trammell: Well can you talk a little about your time as a member of Alpha Nu and some of your most memorable moments? What things really stick out in your mind from those four years you were an undergraduate and involved with Delta Sigma Theta?

Towns: I really think the relationships and – speaking to it this very weekend, we are 74 and 75 years old, maybe a couple of them are 73, I don't know. And here we are, back where we started and our first meeting 30 – at least 30 years ago was here, [?] in front of the Alma Mater getting it, and that was quite a few years after we graduated. We've stayed in touch, we have been with one another through starter husbands and keeper husbands, and kids who were a pain in the butt, and having babies, and aging parents, and we've been to the funerals of most of us, kids' weddings and yeah. These are the people that I am safe with. They know my secrets, I know theirs, ain't nobody talking [laughter].

Trammell: So what do you think the sorority should focus on in the future over the next few years?

Towns: I absolutely believe, very strongly, voter registration, voter education, I do not understand young people not – campus young people necessarily – young people who think, ah, that's politics, I shouldn't vote. You don't know what people went through to get you the absolute privilege of having this say, and now through our own unconsciousness it is being dismantled, people are being disenfranchised, I expect they'll even try IDs, poll – you know it takes me back to poll taxes and all of that stuff that those young people in the 60s marched and died for. How dare you not vote? And they're not just votes. You need to know what you're voting about. And so I believe that the sorority at all levels, amongst all the generations, needs to reach out, make sure we understand our history, that we stay vigilant, that we understand issues. And that we not just march through this world blindly, frittering away. People on this planet would die for the opportunity.

Trammell: So talking about people marching for their rights in the 1960s, you were a student here on campus, were you aware of some of the things happening outside the University and how did those manifest here on campus?

Towns: Actually, we – as we looked back, we were fairly insulated. Television was not an influence, I mean Mrs. Dillard next door to my dad had a television, she let us come in and watch Howdy Doody and Pinkie Lee, and then she sent our sweaty little bodies out of her house [laughter]. So we didn't have all of the current impactful information. So, you know, we had sit-ins at the skating rink, we had sit-ins at Woolworth and whatnot but not of the scale that was done in the South. But there are a couple of exceptions. Connie Corbit, Sandra Mitchel, Tillie Mitchel – who is not here for health reasons – and Diane Canard Key, who passed away a couple of years ago, were arrested in '63, '64, for protesting unfair rental and mortgage practices by the Champaign-Urbana realtors association. Pictures were in the Daily Illini, their mothers were [?] [laughter]. Anyway, so, yeah, there was awareness.

Trammell: So other members of the Alpha Nu chapter were involved in some of these sit-ins that you were describing?

Towns: Those three were for sure. Okay, and, they were still here on campus at that point. Yeah. I mean – other people may have done other things in their hometowns. But there were no organized on the University of Illinois campus marches or whatever.

Trammell: Can you describe any other memories you have of campus? Were you involved in other organizations or activities?

Towns: Not so much. That and because you're young and silly and, you know, you were dating and then the sorority would take up a lot of your energy. I told four service folk, I said, you know I knew that there was a building on the quadrangle for the school of forestry. It never crossed my consciousness that I, a girl and a black girl would have ever considered it myself much less been considered for admission.

Trammell: Can you describe a little bit about your career path? You've alluded to it a few times but how did you get on that career path?

Towns: Well, it's interesting because I think a lot of people, their career path is a series of happenstance, circumstance, accidents, according to what we know of God's greater plan in other people. I started here as a teacher, that was my goal, that was my major. I went from here to jobcorps, and I can't remember details that had anything to do with that or another, but that was a teaching environment with what were the beginning of reaching out to inner-city kids and we were residents-advisors, dorm counselors, college graduates. So there was that. Then I went transferred with that other company, which was Packard-Bell, which in that day made televisions. Transferred to Albuquerque with that company to another [?] from there, moved to Denver, and worked initially with the YWCA in one of their outreach programs to try to get women into non-traditional construction jobs. And from there went to the federal government into its Equal Employment Opportunity function to try to get women – I was with the department of Interior to get women on oil rigs and non-traditional jobs. From there, because I was in interior, became acquainted with the Bureau of Land Management. And then saw a job opportunity in the forest service. And so if you ask me who you worked for I will tell you the US Forest Service, because I started there in what was available, the equal employment opportunity program, sent myself to law school, pregnant, big belly and all [?] and that was a show at that point in history. In fact I was a test case for interior because I questioned why in the world couldn't I use my sick leave and my annual leave for maternity leave. It was a big, hairy deal. And now it's no big deal. But anyway, into the forest service, once I got my law degree I came to the attention, again, by design, watching where people, how people maneuvered themselves, and there were some of the big guys coming out from DC, I made myself available to be one of the guides. And again, that's learning from observing since high school how people move through this world, and they said in the close-up of this evaluation, they said, "what are you going to do for her?" I mean, this was to the regional big guys, you know what I'm saying? [?], [Laughter]. "What would you like to do, Eleanor?" "Well you know I've been thinking about that," I said, "there are these jobs in the lands and realty division and it seems to me they do not require a degree in forestry. That they have far more relevance to law." Big guy in the region watching, and that's how it happened. From there, again, always watching how the system worked, and positioning myself, I entered the senior executive program long before I ever wanted to move to Washington. And again, I was a test case because I became director of lands. From there, the chief of the forest service called me in on a Friday afternoon, and I said, "guys, nothing good happens on a Friday afternoon." I'm looking for the cardboard boxes with my stuff in it and the security guards, and they said, "we need you to go to Albuquerque to be regional forester. Big, hairy deal. And I said, "why do you need me to go?" Well, at that level of executive managerial position, you are not answering questions about trees, you're dealing with protest groups, users interest groups, the whole social fabric and also the values that people place on their public lands. And as well, in New Mexico, there was this big deal about diversity, and there were many Hispanic folks, why were they underrepresented, and why were they not

moving into management positions? There's lots of unrest and whatnot. And they said, "we know somebody who has those skills." Turns out that what you now know as modern forest fires, complex forest fires – a complex fire is when two or three fires join together into one, literally create their own weather pattern. Well, that was when the Los Alamos fire broke out, and I was senior manager in the region on point for that. And at that point, [?] was a woman, and we got together and it was amazing, 'cause we said something the guys would never have said, we said "we're scared to death. We don't want anybody to die. How can we handle this?" And we got it together – the senior person on point in Arizona was a woman. It was a magical time in history. So I learned a lot about fire, and what I learned is I didn't have to know specifics necessarily, I needed to have common sense. And so when those scientists came in and they said, "Ellie, there's this weed tree that's taking over the [?]" and we have an answer, we're gonna bring in locusts." And I said, "guys, I don't know anything about [?] or even that particular weed tree, and certainly not about locusts. What I need to know is if you do this, what's gonna control the locusts? And is my left foot gonna fall off?" [Laughter] 'Cause we're gonna bring in locusts. And so when they started going, "oh, um," I said, "okay. What I need you to do is go back and you think about this." [?] says "look here, quit messing with this earth!"

Trammell: Well you've had such a fascinating career, I'm wondering what's the most important advice you would give a young black woman wanting to be effective and relevant in today's world?

Towns: You have got to know something about something. Alright? There is some aspect of whatever world you want to be part of, and it's usually something nobody wants anything to do with, that you need to step in there at some perpetual moment, take that on, learn about – I don't mean read topic sentences, learn enough to be fluent. For me, it was water rights. Nobody in Colorado, I mean that's, that's war in Colorado. And make that your own, and you will figure out how to make it important to the organization. The other thing is nobody never gets all of what they want. There is no thrill of victory and absolute, abject, agony of defeat. The best agreements in life are some where you get some of what you want, and somebody gets some of what they want. You give up something, they give up something. And it's not something they can do without. It's usually the stuff they give up is something that's secondary or third – tertiary, they really do want. And you figure it out from there. And if you can understand that principle, and allow people some dignity in the discussion, which is not the civil background we're operating on a national scale today, then the world can move an inch forward, sometimes backwards. So that's one. I think the ability to speak publicly is critical. The ability to think on your feet, again debate, not to debate but that debate experience. And to be colloquial in your communication. You and I are talking, and I'm talking plain, I'm not talking platitudes, I'm making it relevant to me as a person, hopefully to you. Those are the three things that I think – at least three things that I think are critical. And the world – some of it's because we're black, some of it's because we're female, some of it's 'cause we're smart, some of it not, some of it's 'cause there are some people who are smarter than us. And we're gonna win some of that and we're gonna lost some of that, and you just need to look at what you consider to be failures and say – 'cause those are the only lessons you really remember, you don't remember when life was good and you were cruising, you remember when you fell on your face – "what did that teach me? And what can I do with it?" I try to tell that to my kids, of course. I know nada, I don't know how I bumbled through this world.

Trammell: Well I really enjoyed talking to you today, thank you so much! And I hope you enjoy the reception this evening, and I hope you have a great time on campus.