

**University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives  
Project 500 Oral History Project  
Interviewee: Leroy McCray  
Interviewer: Heidi Charles  
September 29, 2018  
Length: 00:09:02**

**Heidi Charles:** This is an oral history for the Student Life and Culture Archives. My name is Heidi Charles, and I'm here with Leroy McCray, a U of I alumnus. We are at the University of Illinois Union, and it is September 29, 2018. So let's get started. What years did you attend the U of I?

Leroy McCray: From 1968 to '73.

**HC:** Okay, and how did you choose the U of I? Were you considering other schools, or was this your first choice?

LM: No, actually, I'm from Philadelphia—

**HC:** Okay.

LM: And I had a track scholarship to Temple.

**HC:** Oh, okay.

LM: But my high school is on the street—Broad Street—was on the same street as Temple University, and it became evident that going to Temple would be like going to high school for me, and I wanted a change.

**HC:** Okay.

LM: And a friend of mine called and said that there was a recruiter going around the city trying to get people to come to the University of Illinois, which I had never heard of in my life [laughs]. And it was the opportunity to get away. You know, I was looking at—reading my mom—sitting on the steps reading the newspaper at my mom's house. And *The Philadelphia Inquirer* at that time had the life expectancy of Black youth in North Philly at 18 years old.

**HC:** Oh, wow.

LM: I was about to turn 19. [Laughs.] So it was a thing of getting away.

**HC: Mm-hmm. Okay, um, and what was the climate like when you arrived on campus?**

LM: Ooh, the climate. There are a couple of things that stick out in my mind. First thing is, when I first got my dorm room assignment in Snyder Hall, MRH [Men's Residence Hall], I was coupled with a Caucasian guy. And his family was there and they were all in the room when I arrived. And the look on their faces when they saw me walk in that room was unbelievable. Now, the interesting part about that whole ordeal is—his name was Scott. We went to sleep that evening, and when I woke up the next morning, he was gone. [Laughs.] He was gone in the middle of the night. He just—his parents came and got him and took him out of there. The other incident that sticks out is right after that. It was about three days later, I woke up and there was a noose hanging outside my door. So, that's the kind of environment that I [crosstalk].

**HC: Wow. So, did you participate in the September 10, 1968 sit-in?**

LM: Yes.

**HC: Okay, and how was that like?**

LM: There are different...different takes and people report news differently. I know the newspaper and the media had—because my mom had gotten in in Philadelphia that we were, that we had rioted and... Peaceful sit-in, the same type of issues that we have today. Peaceful sit-in, and then you bring in the police and riot gear for a peaceful sit-in. And that erupted everything more than anything else. I mean, here you are trying to have a peaceful sit-in, and then you look out onto the quad, and you see police in riot gear with dogs. It is no longer peaceful. [Laughs.] But the intent again, we were saying the University hadn't arranged for appropriate housing for us. There were sisters that were sleeping on cots in the basement and laundry rooms. That was one of the things that we were protesting. A lot of people did not receive the financial aid that they were promised, and it was just a question of meeting with the proper authorities and getting stuff resolved. But again, you show up with the police and the riot gear and the dogs, and it doesn't turn peaceful anymore.

**HC: Okay. Were you in any student organizations such as the Black Student Association?**

LM: Yeah, I was in BSA.

**HC: Okay. Can you describe your experience with that?**

LM: Well, my major, I was a fine arts major. So it was basically helping with any graphics or anything that I could do within the organization, getting the word out and getting us together.

**HC: Uh-huh. Cool. Were you involved in extracurricular activities like sports or anything with the fine arts?**

LM: We, a group of us, formulated Club Soul, which became a track team and intramural track.

**HC: Okay.**

LM: And we competed in the intramural games.

**HC: Cool. What were your—some of your favorite memories as a student on campus?**

LM: Exactly what culminates this whole 50th celebration. We, not only—we became a family, more or less. That depending on each other. And a lot of these, a lot of these folks I've known for 50 years. And that's a lifetime of friendship to me. So that's my best memories, and cooking in the dorms, [laughs] getting away from dorm food [laughs].

**HC: Okay, so do you think protest tactics, philosophies, et cetera, related to Project 500 differ from those used in other protests at the times or protests happening today?**

LM: No. We had just, as a people, come from the Dr. King era, and during that time period, you had the Black Panther era, you had the Malcolm X era. But protest is exactly what it is. If you sit at the counter peacefully, you're not bothering anyone. Why is it called a protest? It's because of the social situations that we're in, and it's just protesting what? Inhumanity to man.

**HC: Okay. Any advice you have for incoming freshmen or graduating seniors?**

LM: Ooh. Incoming freshmen, [laughs] have fun the first semester, because it's gonna get serious after that. Outgoing seniors, the real world is a lot different than book world. [Laughs.] Just remember that. And just keep a sense of common sense about yourself, and you'll be all right.

**HC: Great. Is there anything else that you want to add or discuss?**

LM: No, I think we covered just about everything. [Laughs.]

**HC: Great, well, thank you for agreeing to interview.**

LM: My pleasure.

**HC: And yeah, I think that wraps up our interview.**

LM: Okay, thank you.