

**University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives  
Project 500 Anniversary Oral History Project  
Interviewee: Patricia McKinney-Lewis  
Interviewer: Jessica Ballard  
Urbana, Illinois  
September 13, 2018  
Length: 26:04**

**Jessica Ballard: My name is Jessica Ballard from the Student Life and Culture Archives at the University of Illinois. It is September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2018, and I'm here at the home of Patricia Lewis-McKinney, and we're speaking about her time as a student at the University of Illinois and as a participant of Project 500. So, thank you for meeting with me today, and I would like to start off asking you what years did you attend the U of I?**

Patricia McKinney-Lewis: Okay, first of all, it's Patricia McKinney-Lewis

**Jessica Ballard: I apologize**

PML: McKinney is my maiden name, right. I attended when I earned my bachelor's degree, I attended from 1968 to 1973, and then I earned my master's degree in 1976, and then I went back and earned an advanced certificate in administration and organization in leadership in 1996, but it was conferred in January of 1997.

**JB: Oh ok. So, how did you decide on the U of I, and did you consider attending any other schools?**

PML: Yes, actually, I used...I was a part of...my parents were active in the American Legion, and I was a part of the junior American Legion. And I would come to the University of Illinois every year for an American Legion conference...state conference...and it would be at Gregory Hall, and I would see how large the University of Illinois was, and I heard about how hard it was to get into the University of Illinois, so I never thought about even applying. I applied to go to Southern Illinois University, and that's where I planned to go until I was recruited to...look into coming to the University of Illinois under Project 500.

**JB: And, when you got here in 1968 what was the climate like when you arrived on campus?**

PML: Well, the very first week, it was fun...many of us came from different places for Project 500. We were here a week before the other students were here, so we had a comraderie. A friend of mine from Springfield, we had known each other through the NAACP. We were both part of the youth NAACP state program...organization, I should say. So, we knew each other through the NAACP. So, we came together and we were roommates and it was fun the first week and

then after the first week problems started and...we attended classes, and we were in classes where there weren't any...at least I was in classes where there weren't any other African Americans sometimes in the big lecture hall like in Lincoln Hall, I could look across the room and try to spot another face of color and there weren't that many, and so it was lonely at first in some of the classes where there weren't any other African Americans or very few.

**JB: And you were living in the dorms when you first moved down here?**

PML: I was in Busey Hall, yes, I lived in Busey Hall. And, it was fine. I liked it because it was small. It was homey. It worked out well for me.

**JB: Okay. And did you participate in the well-known September 10<sup>th</sup> sit-in?**

PML: Yes, I did. Even though I was satisfied with my accommodations at Busey Hall, I wanted to show support of the students who were not satisfied with their accommodations. Some of them were put in lounges and were assigned to sewing rooms and things like that. So, my roommate and I decided we would participate in the sit-in. We marched to the Union, and then we went into the South Lounge and while we were waiting for the administrators to come and speak to us, we were just playing cards and just having a good time, and there were some speeches that were given by students. There were speeches that were given by university personnel. And we did hear some glass breaking. At one point, we were told we needed to leave because the 12 AM curfew was approaching, and we needed to be in our dorms, and so we said no because we had not met with, I guess it was Chancellor Peltason, we were waiting to see, and he had not arrived, so we said no. We wanted to hear from the administrator that we were waiting to hear from, and so at that point, we refused to leave. And then at another point, after we talked to some of the personnel, administrators, we wanted to leave, and we were told no, we couldn't leave, and that there were people outside the union who would harm us, and we could hear glass breaking, so we didn't know what was going on, so we stayed.

Around 2 o'clock in the morning, we were given permission to leave, and we thought we were going to our dorms, but instead of going to the left to go to Busey Hall I was told to go to the right and marched into a paddy wagon and we spent the night in a jail cell. There were over a hundred females in one jail cell, slept on the floor. That morning, we were given, I think it was an egg sandwich, cold egg sandwich, and we were allowed one phone call, and I thought, "I'm not calling my mother and father and telling them I'm in jail." I mean, I grew up in a pretty strict household, churchgoing, even though I was involved in marches and things like that through the NAACP, I had never been arrested. And so, I called...that April, we had a regional conference in Grand Rapids Michigan NAACP and I knew from that conference that Ernie Westfield was the president of the chapter here in Champaign, so my one phone call was to Ernie Westfield, who was the president of the NAACP chapter, and I told him what had happened and asked if he could get the NAACP Defense League to get us out of jail or to somehow get us out of jail. We were released. I wasn't sure if he was able to do that or if other individuals were involved in

getting us out of jail, so we were released, and we were told later that we had a court date to appear in court, and I recall walking to Urbana courthouse... Urbana county... Champaign County courthouse in Urbana, rather, and appearing before Sarah Lump, Judge Sarah Lump, and she would talk to us, and we would meet with her as a group, a group of young females who were arrested. She just talked to us about doing well in school and keeping up our grades, and so forth and we met with her twice, and then the charges were dropped.

**JB: So, did you feel, maybe after that event, that there was a big impact that happened afterwards with the campus?**

PML: Well, it showed that we were united. We were united in a sense that the campus wanted to meet the needs culturally of the students and that we had cultural needs that would provide and help us as we matriculated here as students, and out of that unity through the BSA, the Black Student Association, different things such as the Black Chorus, the Omni Move Dancers, the African American Culture Center, the house, later named the Bruce Nesbitt African American Culture Center. So, a number of programs that still exist today came out of that movement and that voice that we provided, that we wanted these things as students, that we needed to have something that dealt with black culture while we were students here at the university, so I think some good things came out of it.

**JB: Yeah, definitely and you mentioned BSA, were you involved in the Black Student Association?**

PML: Yes, I did, I went to the meetings. Yes, I was involved. I wasn't an officer or anything like that, but yes, I did attend the meetings.

**JB: Were you involved in any other organizations or extracurricular activities?**

PML: No, because as a high school student, I was very involved in my hometown of Danville, and when I came to college, I wanted to concentrate on college, so no, I wasn't involved in any other organizations. I knew the University of Illinois had a reputation of being a very prestigious school and also a school that was hard, and I wanted to concentrate on my studies, so I didn't want to get sidetracked as far as giving of my time to other organizations, so I wanted to just dedicate my time to being a student.

**JB: Oh yeah, and I'm sure the Black Student Association just was very active anyway, as far as just with the level of commitment.**

PML: Oh yes, and there were older students that were very active, so I participated when I had time, but it wasn't something that took priority at that time.

**JB: Great. So, what are some of your favorite memories when you were a student?**

PML: My favorite memories were especially some of the social activities so the parties, the dances, those were some of my favorite memories. The talks we had at the dorm among the African American students. There were a number of African American girls in my dorm from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and some from Chicago, so we were all close in the dorms, even though we may not have had classes together, we still spent time together when we were at the dorm and socially.

**JB: Great, so were there any events like at the Black Cultural Center that ever maybe stood out to you?**

PML: Not at that time because it was just getting started that first year, and then after that I married, and so I became a married student, so I wasn't in the party scene or the social scene as much.

**JB: And do you think today that some of the protest tactics and philosophies related to Project 500 might differ in the present day?**

PML: No I think we probably gone back to some of the tactics that we used during that time as far as the marches, the sit-ins, those were the very peaceful type of demonstrations, and during that time, I was in the NAACP and some people some African Americans, and we said Black people at that time felt that the NAACP may have been a little too passive, because also at that time other organizations such as the Black Panthers, SNCC, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, they were becoming a little more aggressive, and the NAACP was basically following the footsteps of Dr. Martin Luther King, which was a non-violent type of protest, so I think we've kind of gone back to some of those tactics such as the marches, the sit-ins that we had at that time.

**JB: Very much so and so do you have any advice for incoming seniors and for incoming freshman and for graduating seniors?**

PML: For graduating seniors from high school? Incoming freshman?

**JB: Incoming freshman, so recently graduating, just graduated from high school, and those who are seniors getting ready to take the next step out of here...**

PML: I would say to incoming freshmen to make a priority out of your studies and to major in staying in school and partying has its place and can be fun, but getting an education is the reason why you're in school, and hopefully that would be your most important focus. My first year in college I saw a number of students flunk out and sometimes we can get too involved in having fun and not being focused on taking care of business, so I've always been focused on trying to take care of business and try to have fun along the way, but the business is the priority and being

a student is the priority and taking care of the business of being a student. To seniors who are graduating, I would say you use your skills to help someone along the way, reach back in your community, and make sure that you give back to the community. I was fortunate to have individuals in my community who saw to it that young people were exposed to different things such as being active on the state level of the NAACP at the time when I was a freshman here at the University of Illinois and at the time of the Project 500 sit-in I was the first vice president of the state youth for the NAACP so one thing that I didn't want to get out after being arrested was that I was a state office for the NAACP I didn't want to see any negative headlines pertaining to my activism role with the NAACP and what happened here what was framed as happened here because it was called a riot; it wasn't a riot. We heard glass breaking, we heard something happening at the time when we were in the Union in the south lounge, but I didn't see any damage, and many of us didn't see any damage, and so we were accused of something that really didn't happen.

**JB: Right, and yeah, I've heard that and seen that in the press too, that it was made to be a lot more to be than it really was. Is there anything that you would like to add?**

PML: I've always been active in my community since graduating from the University of Illinois and I just hope that I have made my community proud, my community of Danville knowing that how I was mentored that hopefully I have been one to have reached back and tried to mentor those behind me as far as helping students, working with students, I always knew I wanted to be a teacher from the time that I was nine years old, I knew I wanted to be a teacher, so I stayed focus, I sort of like...had tunnel vision, that I was going to go to college. There were seven children in my family. My father worked; my mother didn't work. He was old-fashioned; he thought having his wife work outside the home was sort of an embarrassment to him, that he couldn't take care of his family. So, there were seven children in my family, and I knew my parents didn't have money to send me to college, but for some reason, I knew that I was going to college, and even with Danville being a blue-collar town, thoughts of working in a factory never entered my mind. I always knew college was the next step; I made sure I took college prep courses in high school. I had the geometry, the chemistry, the algebra, everything as far as needed to go college, and so with that in mind by going to the University of Illinois I would've gone to Southern had I not gone, come to the University of Illinois but I proved to the five sisters and brothers behind me that you can still be poor and go to college by getting scholarships, grants, and I had federal work study. When I compared my financial I package here at the University of Illinois compared to the one I was getting at Southern Illinois University, there was no...there was a big difference in the amount of money I would get in student grants and loans here, the loans were less here than at SIU, so that made me decide that was a no brainer that I would come here instead of SIU because I was getting money and grants and I had federal work study and I worked also.

So, I feel that by me going to college, being the first person in my immediate to go to school, to college it proved to my brothers and sisters that you can still be poor and go to college, so five of

seven children have college degrees as a result of me going to college, so we have to be role models for the younger ones. We have to set expectations for our brothers and sisters that if I can do it, you can do it, and they have often told me that because I went to college and finished, that gave them the desire that they could do it too, and so college in my family became an expectation. As far as younger brothers and sisters and then our children...so it set an expectation in our family that this is what is expected and even if you don't go to college cause college isn't for everyone that you should acquire some type of a skill and be productive in society and to give back to society and so in that, when we achieve...or as we become...at a certain a level in our lives we have to reach back and help others, and so as a result I have started certain things in this community for children; I have a scholarship program at my church that I give to children each year to encourage them to write and hopefully that they will become good writers and can apply for scholarships and become employed as far as being able to fill out job applications.

So, I encourage students in grades 3-8 to read and write, and if they accomplish or meet all the criteria for the scholarship, I give them money to buy school supplies. And I focus and grades 3-8 because I feel if they become good writers in the early ages that they will continue to improve their writing as they become older and they can apply for scholarships and things of that nature and that has happened to one young man who happened to start in my program when he was in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and he wrote an essay to...with his application to Tuskegee University, and they were so impressed with his writing that he earned a \$40,000 scholarship, and he attributes his writing and his love for writing to the program that was started at St. Lucie's Church when he was in third grade. And so that was very heartwarming when you set out to accomplish a goal, and you see someone who really exemplifies why you started the program in the first place.

**JB: Yeah, it is very much that when you started as a student here that you saw some changes that you wanted to see occur, and were very active and then continued to do that within your communities.**

PML: Yes, and after becoming an administrator I saw how students struggled with writing and with reading, especially African American students and so I wanted to establish a way to encourage them and support and also pay them, to give them a financial reason to become interested in reading and writing and then hopefully that would become very natural for them and so with that it's been very gratifying to see the children as they improve and as I read their essays year after year when they participate and how they improve their writing and their reading, and I realize as an educator that reading and writing, those are the key to all the other courses, especially reading impacts so many other subject areas, so if children are good in reading and writing, they are going to excel in other subject areas as well.

**JB: Yeah, it's very important so that when they come to the U of I, they're in very good shape.**

PML: Then, also at my church, I've started working with a group of children on conflict resolution. I realized that we often want our children to make the right choices, but we don't teach them how to do that, and so I am involved with a group of children, and we talk to them about how to navigate problems with people in authority whether its at the high school, whether its in the city that they live in, dealing with police or other people in authority: how to successfully navigate those situations without getting into trouble or getting killed as we've seen in some cities and that has been very successful also, and children have come back and shared different situations they've had in school especially with teachers or with deans and how they have handled those situations by using the skills that we've taught them, and they've been successful with those type of problems, where the conflicts have been a win-win situation for both parties.

**JB: Did you feel like you had to do some of that when you were a student here, as far as...?**

PML: Not so much that...I had conflicts with peers or professor but there were times that things were said to us as students as African American students that were said in a way...that were not in a nice way or a politically friendly way. At that time, that would make us feel less than what we are and sometimes when you are faced with those type of adversities it only makes you stronger to show someone that you're wrong and I'm going to prove that I can do just as well as anyone else and so with me some of things maybe that I have experienced some little smart remarks, sarcastic remarks stated by professors I didn't take those things personally I just took them as I'm going to show you as revenge. My revenge was getting my degrees, and so my revenge was getting three degrees, so you didn't think I didn't have the qualifications to come because I came through Project 500, I'll show you. And so, I have three degrees to prove it.

**JB: That's really great, and making sure that other students get to have multiple degrees as well. Great, so, is there anything else?**

PML: No.

**JB: Okay, so that concludes our interview. Thank you so much.**

PML: You're quite welcome.