

University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives
Delta Sigma Theta Oral History Project
Interviewee: Carol Easton Lee (Safisha Madhubuti)
Interviewer: Bethany Anderson, University of Illinois Archives
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Bethany Anderson: Alright, today is May 22, 2018 and I'm Bethany Anderson from the University of Illinois archives. I'm in room 317 in the Illini Union with Carol Easton Lee to talk with her about her time as a student at the University of Illinois and in the Delta Sigma Theta Alpha Nu chapter. Alright Carol, thank you for talking with me today. Could you tell me what years you were at the University of Illinois?

Carol Easton Lee: I would have been here from 1963 to 1966. I came as a sophomore, as a transfer student.

Anderson: And what year did you join the Alpha Nu chapter?

Lee: 1964, I think.

Anderson: And how did being one of around 200 black students on campus of the 24,000 affect your college experience?

Lee: My freshman – I grew up in Chicago, graduated from Chicago public schools, and my freshman year I had a scholarship to a private university, Illinois Wesleyan in Bloomington, Illinois. And on that campus there were ten black students out of 1,000. And so for homecoming week, I came to Urbana for homecoming. And suddenly there were 200 black students. And I thought I reached heaven, so I decided to transfer. I think one of the differences, if I were to compare my experience as, you know, one of ten on Illinois Wesleyan, the ten black students, we constituted a strong social network, but coming to Urbana, there were – it was more than that there were more black students, there were the sorority life, I would say all the sorority and fraternity life on the whole, I think for me was that social network so it was both. I met – that sophomore year I was living in LAS Lincoln Avenue Residence, and one of my other [?] who's being interviewed right now in the next room, in fact, Betty Boldon, also lived in LAS and we both worked in the kitchen. And that's how I met – that was sort of my introduction to Delta Sigma Theta through her. But I just think fundamentally it was a much more rewarding environment for me, because there was many more social networks and institutions that I could affiliate with in comparison with the private school where we were one in ten.

Anderson: And what was your major when you, or, what did you decide to major in?

Lee: I was a major – I was the same major I had before, I was an English major in the teacher education program.

Anderson: Did you know any other students before you came here, who were already here on campus, so was it like a brand new community?

Lee: It was a brand new community, right.

Anderson: So did you seek any counsel or support while you were here as a student, and if so from whom?

Lee: I honestly don't remember what I would consider University social support. My social support community really was largely the women with whom I was affiliated in Delta Sigma Theta. My freshman – my sophomore year when I came to LAS, I was in the room and I had been assigned a roommate who was a young white girl, and she came into the room and she saw me and then she turned around and she left. And I never saw her again. So that first – and all the while I was at LAS it was that first semester, I was in the room by myself because this young lady did not wish to be a roommate with me so she just left. But I don't recall, quite frankly, I don't recall anyone from LAS or from the University sort of contacting me or asking me how I felt or whether or not they wanted to make some additional arrangements, I just ended up in the room by myself. Turned out to be fine. But I had at that point, because we worked in the kitchen, that was our work-study for both Betty and myself. It was really through Betty that I began to meet other students, in particular the Deltas. But the social network was through sorority and fraternity life. We engage with one another so I certainly knew students who were in the other black sororities and the fraternities. I was actually the Alpha sweetheart, Alpha Phi Alpha was the black sororities – fraternities. And so that really was my social network.

Anderson: So you mentioned that Betty was sort of the person who got you involved in Alpha Nu. Is that correct?

Lee: She got me involved in Alpha Nu but Betty and I had a lot in common, so we had both – we were both English majors, we had both grown up in Chicago, we had both come from, you know, really working class families. In fact in terms of that sort of network of support over the years, even after graduation, we maintained a long-term relationship, so she knows all my family, I know all her family, I know her mother, her father, her sisters, her brothers, and like so. That was – I would say that I had memories of social activities on campus, I remember – I don't remember what that building is at the end of the quad, but they would show films in that building. It's that old green building on top.

Anderson: Is it the Altgeld building? Where the math department is? Does that sound right?

Lee: No. It's at the end of the quad.

Anderson: Oh, Foellinger.

Lee: I don't remember, if you told me I wouldn't know. It's at the end of the quad.

Anderson: I think it's Foellinger – yeah it's at the very end of the quad, I know what you're talking about.

Lee: I remember they used to show films there. And so that was it, I don't – it's been a long time but I don't have those recollections of a support system outside of the fraternity and sorority social networks that we had.

Anderson: So that was the sort of main social framework that you were sort of engaged in as a student here. So could you talk a bit more about then your earliest memories of being a part of Alpha Nu? What's your sort of first memory of being introduced to that sorority and becoming a part of that network?

Lee: I'm gonna be a terrible [laughter] 'cause I don't remember...

Anderson: [Laughter] No worries, any memory's fine too!

Lee: I remember – I don't remember the introduction exactly except I know it was through Betty, and I know that I established a network of friends, we were able to have social events. Some of the members of the sorority's boyfriends were football players so we had some access to athletics at that point. We didn't have a house and so we would use the Union for some of our meetings and gatherings. But I think the circumstances – particularly not having a house, the AKAs, Alpha Kappa Alphas, had a house, the Kappas I believe also had a house, fraternity – I think forced us to be creative and to depend on one another a great deal.

Anderson: So what lessons from that experience did you apply to other aspects of your life after you left the University, or even while you were still a student here?

Lee: Well, I don't – the only thing I would say perhaps would be two things, one is there was and is a culture in Delta Sigma Theta about academic excellence and so there was a clear set of expectations among all of us and it wasn't based on any sort of external pressures that we had. We expected that we would all do well, and we did. I mean, if you look at all the women that are being interviewed here today, we've all gone on to have really very important and stellar careers. I was actually recognized a couple years ago with an LAS alumni award. I know that I got a fine education here. I went on from here to pursue a master's degree in English at the University of Chicago, and then many years later a Ph. D. at the University of Chicago, and I have no doubt that my academic career here certainly prepared me for that work. I think – I currently work, I have an endowed share in the school of education, Edwina D. Tarry endowed professorship at Northwestern University in the school of education. I've been able to go in terms of also national recognition, I'm a member of the National Academy of Education, I'm also a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, founded way back in the day. So I think I would say the sort of socialization toward excellence and scholarship and pursuit of inquiry was both supported through my social network in the Alpha Nu chapter Delta Sigma Theta but equally of the academics in terms of classwork here at the University. I don't remember a great deal about the courses that I had to take, except that I had a zoology class, I remember some old next to the Union, I had to cut up a frog. But other than that most of my memory is really around my classes in the English department. The one hand, they were stimulating and rigorous classes that certainly prepared me for my future training, specifically my master's from the University of Chicago. But so, the idea of the sort of pursuit of knowledge was important. I've had kind of three career tracks in my life, so I was trained as a high school English teacher. So when I graduated from here I went and I worked in Chicago public schools as a high school English teacher. Then went on to get the master's in English from the University of Chicago, then transitioned into working in the community college system in Chicago. And then in 1974... actually, when I graduated in 1966 we were in the height of the Black Power Movement – the Civil Rights Movement, the beginning of the Black Power Movement and the Black Arts Movement, and so I sort of came of age – which was interesting because I don't recall a significant presence of any of those movements on the campus at the time when I graduated in '66. But once I went to Chicago, there was a whole community in the spirit of activism, so I joined as a high school English teacher, I joined what was called Operation Breadbasket, which has gone on to be Operation Push with Jesse Jackson, at that time it was called Operation Breadbasket. And they had what was called a teachers division and I joined that. And again, it was about activism and the importance of community support for educated black children.

Then [?] got exposed to the Black Arts Movement, the Black Power Movement, I got my master's degree focusing on the Black Arts Movement, and it was around that time after that I met the man who would become my husband, Don L., who was a famous poet, he was a leader of the Black Arts Movement initially, his name was Don L. Lee and then he changed it to Haki R. Madhubudi. And we decided in 1960 – my husband had already, in 1967, founded Third World Press, which is the oldest, continuously publishing black publishing company, certainly in the country if not the world. It's in year 51 now, it started in 1967. Then in 1969 we started a community-based organization called the Institute of Positive Education. And we had a number – we had publishing, we had... sort of a farm – we had a farm actually, a co-op, a food co-op. And we had Saturday community programs. And then in 1972 we decided to start a school called New Concept School. We started with young preschool age children, and the parents were so – felt so positively about the Saturday experience that they encouraged us to start a full time program. So In 1974, we established New Concept as a full time, pre-K to elementary program. And I was one of the founders and served as the director of that program, learning to teach young children because I was trained as a high school English teacher here. And...

Anderson: And you taught community college before that, too.

Lee: And I taught community college, so it was a learning curve to learn how to work with young children. I did that from – I quit my job working for City College, my mother had thought I lost my mind. But I did that from 1974-1988. And then by 1988, I felt that I had been engaged in so much work in education that I needed an opportunity to step back and sort of study what we were doing, and that's when I decided to pursue the Ph. D at the University of Chicago. And I did that – finished my Ph. D in three years from 1988 to 1991, and then went to Northwestern University where I've been, and will be retiring shortly. So...

Anderson: And what was your area of focus for your Ph. D and that you pursued as a sort of research focus?

Lee: So my research focuses on literacy with a specific focus on response to literature, which I would connect again back to my training here as an English major. And I've developed a program called, or framework called Cultural Modeling that involves a very careful analysis of the [?] demands, in this case of interpreting literature, and then try to analyze practices in which students – particularly students from non-dominant communities and particularly African American students – where they are using the same sort of strategies and kinds of knowledge and heuristics to interpret everyday narratives. Could be rap lyrics, film, TV shows, cartoons. And focusing on those is what we call cultural datasets to make the knowledge that's largely tacit and everyday explicit to then be able to apply to formal works of literature. So I've continued that connection. We had funding for the work from a number of foundations – the Spencer Foundation, the McDonnell Foundation, the Institute of Education Sciences, among others. And we use models of that also in our schools so we continue to have our schools. So as I said, New Concept School that we founded in 1972 is still operating now as an early childhood program. In 1998 we decided to take the elementary portion and turn it into a charter school because the charter movement was opening. So we founded in 1998 the Betty Shabazz International Charter Schools. And so the Betty Shabazz Charter Schools is twenty years old this year, 2018. We serve around 600 children a day and two elementary campuses. So for me – and so some of the research that I've done I've actually been able to conduct in our schools. So there's been a nice marriage for me between what I consider my kind of political/social justice work in developing these – the model of education we have in our schools

is African centered, and we take the position that part of what has allowed people of African descent, not only United States but in the diaspora to survive slavery, to survive Jim Crow, was in both formal, informal, explicit and tacit ways to sustain practices that are connected to West African practices, so we argue that whatever our ancestors who were enslaved that allowed them to get up every day, put one foot in front of the next under conditions we cannot imagine, are worthy of being passed on across generations. You could think in a similar vein to Steven Spielberg for what it's worth in archiving narratives of Jews who were survivors of the Holocaust, you know, in Europe, saying that whatever knowledge, belief systems, relationship building, that allow people – again under circumstances that we cannot imagine – that that's knowledge that is worthy of being transferred, passed down through generations. So, that's what we have done in terms of our African centered work, and I've been able I think to connect that again to my research work in terms of the study of literature, so in all of the research projects that we've been doing over the last twenty-seven/twenty-eight years, and we typically are working in high schools with predominantly African American populations. We start with what we call the cultural dataset, so how does a kid know in Tupac's *The Rose that Grew from Concrete* that it's not really a rose, that it's symbolic – the kids get it, they know that it's not a real rose. And so we help them to make explicit the strategies they're using then apply it to literature, formal literature. But we will start with formal literature typically in the African American tradition in part because we think there are lessons about humanity in all literature, but these are lessons that are often going to be close to the kids' experience, and then they move from the African American text to text from the canon from across the tradition and across the world. But again, it goes back, if I begin – if I will – the connection to my trainings in the English major here is the understanding that literature from all traditions, the literature that survives the test of time is literature where authors have what I call the gift of second sight, to have insight in the conundrums in what it means to be human and to offer resources or sort of wrestling with particular kinds of complexities that something about the specific nature of that complexity will shift from one historical moment to the next but there's still an underlying set of challenges about identity, wrestling and wrestling with challenge and the like. That's, you know, part of the human experience. But I certainly learned – I learned to love the literature from other traditions through my training here, because I never in three years here as an English major – and I loved all of my classes and did very very well, I mean I was a James Scholar and I kept my scholarship and all that – but I never once read a work by an African American author. Not one time [laughter]. And so when I worked – decided to work on the master's work in the black arts movement it was a 360 degree shift for me because I never had that experience as an undergrad.

Anderson: How many other black students were in your classes, your English classes here, do you recall offhand?

Lee: Betty [laughter], Valerie, two of my sorority sisters, very few.

Anderson: Well, I wanted to get back to a few questions about the sorority just because we have a little bit of limited time here, but thank you for talking to me about your career and research, that's really fascinating. So, what should the sorority focus on in the next few years do you think?

Lee: I think the continued focus – which I think is part of the history certainly of Delta Sigma Theta, [?] was a Delta, is to provide a framework for service is very much a pillar of life in Delta Sigma Theta, it's a requirement that we engage in community service, and so I think that the myriad of ways in which the sorority broadly speaking – which I think it does but certainly in terms of Alpha Nu – to socialize young

women into seeing community service as part of their legacy, that their work here at the University is not simply about gaining skills that will allow them to accumulate personal wealth, that's certainly a part of it we didn't go here to come out to be poor, but that equally important to use the knowledge and skills that they have developed – the technical expertise they develop in their work in the academy here to use for social justice, to do social good in the world. I also think that this is a powerful moment in time for women, certainly in the United States, I think worldwide but certainly in the United States, and that it becomes I think important – but I think again that's part of the continuity of tradition for Delta Sigma Theta but certainly in Alpha Nu of support for their understanding that they're empowered as women, that they are in charge of their bodies, they are in charge of the trajectories of their lives, and the importance of maintaining of -- one of the gifts I think of the sorority experience was certainly my experience with Delta, with Alpha Nu, Delta Sigma Theta here, is that from that experience of with women with whom I was in school from 1963 to 1966, my lifelong friends, they're lifelong friends through good times, through bad times, we are dispersed and live across the country, but we still even after these fifty years sustain support so we know if somebody needs something that we're all going to be there for one another, that's part of what sorority life, one of the things of sorority life I think, supports. So my hope and anticipation would be that this would continue. The other I would say is one other thing's that the Alpha Nu Deltas from the sixties did was to establish Hattie [?], a scholarship fund, which was named after one of our sorority sisters – she was actually my roommate for two years, dear friends, are well and her family are well, Hattie [?], she died in an accident in Nigeria, doing some work in Nigeria, but the hope– again, through the scholarship, is to continue to support Alpha Nu but also to keep Hattie's legacy alive so that future sorors know who she is and what good she did in world, she was an art major and extraordinarily talented.

Anderson: So this leads me into my last question which you've partly answered already but I'd like to ask you what is the most important advice that you can give to a young black woman wanting to be effective and relevant in today's world?

Lee: I think continuing to have a social network so that you don't perceive yourself as an island, and I think this actually – I hadn't thought about this before, but I think one of the connections between my experiences in Alpha Nu and the social network of relationships that I established in building these independent black institutions in Chicago is they're parallel in many respects, that they're very strong relationships, there're very strong relationships among the women both in the Institute of Positive Education, Betty Shabazz. These are also lifelong, we've had children together, raised children together, raised children in our schools. So that you're not wrestling with the conundrums of being a human being, of being a woman, and being a person of African descent in the United States, and lots of other things related to personality, health issues and the like, that you're not wrestling with these things by yourself. And I think another interesting – I think that was the lesson of Alpha Nu for me for those three years, and I found a similar set of supports and support for visioning possibilities in the network of men and women with whom we've been building for the last almost fifty years, these independent institutions in Chicago. The other interesting parallel which I hadn't thought about before was both during my time at the University of Illinois I'm living in a historical moment where I'm getting other signals about possibilities through the Civil Rights Movement, then coming in '66 and in Chicago at the height, 'cause Chicago has more independent black institutions with longevity than any other city in the country, coming out now to an expanded set of historical contexts, and I think connecting back to Alpha Nu today that the whole variety of the, you know, the Me Too Movement, the Black Lives Matter

movement, the focus on LBQT populations, that these young people are also living in a historical moment that puts before them new possibilities of what it means to be human and what it means to be of the necessity of not accepting the status quo conditions. And so I think the possibilities of what the sorority can do right now, and the campus at large can do right now, I think is huge, the fact that the University of Illinois has a black chancellor, there were no – I think there was one, Clarence – Betty's gonna talk about him – Shelly, was a black administrator here at the time, but there was not a strong – I never had a black professor in any class ever while I was here. I don't remember black counsellors...I mean they may have been somewhere but they were never part of my whole experience in terms of connecting with black people was that social network really both within Delta and across the sororities and fraternities, and the way in which even black student who were not members of the sororities and fraternities were still part of our social network, we still socialized, we did things together. I still have friends from here who were not members of any of the sororities or fraternities, but they're still, you know, lifelong friends, one of them, Paulette Jones, her kids went to our school way back so...I think the extent to which both the, you know, Deltas, the sororities, fraternities and the University at large, just think about the campus of this size, the necessity of building small communities of social supports. It was interesting – I know, time – my oldest son is a civil engineer and he applied here and he applied to Northwestern, so I brought him down here 'cause it's my Alma Mater, I brought him down here for kind of an orientation in the engineering school, and it was all fine until the man said the same thing they told us back in the sixties, "turn to your right, turn to your left, and at the end of the year one of these people are not going to be here." They said it to us in the sixties, my son is forty years old now but when he was applying to school twenty years ago now that that same message, and that's when he decided he would go to Northwestern University because they didn't tell him "look to your right, look to your left," [laughter]. So that was interesting.

Anderson: Not a very encouraging message. It sounds like the social network that was here was the thing that sort of was a thread through your life, if I may speculate. Are there any other final things you'd like to share or?

Lee: Well, I'm a proud alumni of the University of Illinois here, I think that I received, you know, an excellent education. The pieces that were missing I think were provided by Alpha Nu Delta Sigma Theta, and the social network that black students created for one another. And so the complementary – because I think had they not, if I had not had that complementary of a fine academic training in the English department, which I absolutely did, connected to a strong, intimate social network, it would have been a very different experience, that was what I was missing at Illinois Wesleyan. I had a fine academic program, but my social network were ten people, nine people including me. And it wasn't that I didn't have white friends, it was just a different connection as I said, my connection when I first met Betty was that our backgrounds were so similar, we both grew up working class, we both love literature, you know, similar family dynamics, and I didn't have that then.

Anderson: Great, well thank you so much Carol for talking with me today.

Lee: Okay, well thank you. Sorry I didn't remember more details.