University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives
Project 500 Oral History Project
Interviewee: Connie Eggleston
Interviewer: Ellen Swain
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Ellen Swain: So this is an oral history interview for the University of Illinois Archives. The date is September 29, 2018. The interviewer is Ellen Swain, and I'm talking to Connie Penda Eggleston, who is an alumna of the University of Illinois. We're going to talk about her time on campus when she was a student. So I wondered if maybe a good way to get started was to talk about maybe your background before U of I. Where you were born, kind of your family and?

Connie Eggleston: I was born on State Street, Chicago, Illinois. "State Street, that great street," is what they called it. To parents, CJ Cozy Eggleston and Frances Marie Eggleston. I was born October 27, 1948. And they were musicians, well renowned musicians, and so when I was like, three years old, my grandparents, my grandmother, my paternal grandmother, said she'd keep us for my parents to be able to travel on the road. So they traveled in caravans throughout the United States. And his name is Cozy Eggleston, and my mother played in the band under Marie Stone, because they couldn't be married and play in the same band at the time. It was my dad's band, so he hired my mom to work with him, and she changed the name from Eggleston, took the E off the end of the Eggleston and put the S and called herself Marie Stone. So S-T-O-N-E. So that's what they did.

ES: So why couldn't they be married in the same band?

CE: Huh?

ES: Why could she not be—?

CE: It was against the union. Because men would maybe bother women or something. My dad would have been fighting them or something, [laughs] you know, so, but, you know, they juggled it around so that he could do that, you know. So they traveled throughout the United States, and we stayed with my grandmother in Cairo, Illinois.

ES: Oh, wow, the other end of the state.

CE: Mhm. So five years we did that. And my grandmother would go to church, and she'd take us to church every Sunday, and she'd shout. And I was little, and I didn't—I thought she was sick. So she had a stroke at the church one day, and I said, 'See, I knew something was wrong.' And they couldn't find my parents because they were on the road. And so they found my dad's first cousin, and she came and

stayed with us till my mother came. My dad told me the story. I'm writing a book about him and their travels. And so they eventually moved us back to Chicago in 1958 or something like that. I was, I was three going on four to five, five years later, however old I was. Eight or something like that, so I was in third grade when I went back into Chicago. So that's, that's what happened.

So then after that, you know, my grandmother became ill, and when I was in college down here, she passed away. Yeah, my grandmother, we tried to keep her in our home, but it was too much for us, and we ended up putting her in a facility and she passed away.

So then my brother—I'm talking about this on my presentation—my brother went away to Champaign down here, and I graduated in 1966 and he wanted me to—he called up and asked me, what was I going to do? I said, well, people kept telling me, I'm tall and this and that and that and how I looked, that I should be a model. But I was number 10 in my class out of over 250 students, I wasn't a dummy, you know, very intelligent, I say.

And so I ended up—he called and he said, 'What are you going to do?' I said, 'I'm going to be a model.' He said, 'No, you can model some other time. You know, you need an education.' So he said, 'where you want to go?' He mentioned this place. They had number of little students of Blacks, and this and that, you might want to go to Southern, so I said, 'Oh, no, I want to go with you.' So I came down here in 1966 and a year and a half of this, it wasn't—I didn't have much support. I didn't have much of anything down here. And I punched. So when my brother Martin Luther King was assassinated, he said, 'Come on back.' I started at a little junior college at the start, getting all A's. And he said, 'Come on back.' And so I came back and the rest is history.

ES: I see. So how did he choose U of I? How did he end up here?

CE: I don't know, just, I don't remember how he chose. I think—I don't know if he knew anybody down here at the time, but he wanted to come here, and they didn't have anything set up for him yet. So he ended up going to Roosevelt for his first semester, and he came on down here after that.

ES: I see. Was education important in your family?

CE: Education was very important in my family. Yeah, my mother took French in high school, and she graduated in 1936 from high school, and she took French. So I took French when I was in college. I took French when I was in high school and took French when I was in college down here, and so we're a very educated family. My brothers, my—I have two children, my son has two children. He—I took both his children out to college, as a matter of fact. His daughter graduated from Dartmouth. She's going to be here tomorrow night—tonight to accept my brother's award, Johari Eggleston Bracey. And then her brother graduated from Xavier. My son graduated from Grambling State University, and my daughter

graduated from the University of Texas in Austin, and now she's a physician. Her name is Dr. [crosstalk].

ES: Wow.

CE: Education is important.

ES: So let me get this straight. You came here in the fall of '66, and then you went back and came back to Illinois?

CE: Yeah, because I flunked out.

ES: I see.

CE: [Crosstalk] I said punched, you didn't know what punched meant.

ES: That's what my problem was [laughs].

CE: The Chief got me. That's what they used to call the Chief Illini. We said the Chief, you got to study, if we're at a party, the Chief is gonna—but mine wasn't from not studying. Mine was from the fact that a lot of, you know, instructors looked like they didn't think I knew anything or something, like just want me like flunking out. A lot of Black students flunked out in '65, '64, '66. I don't know what happened before that, but a lot of Black students—

ES: But then you came back in '68.

CE: When my brother was a recruiter, when they marched to the Chancellor and said, 'We need more students down here.'

ES: I see, I see.

CE: And I came back.

ES: I see.

CE: And I graduated, and I got my master's degree.

ES: So what was it like in the fall of 1968? What was the climate like? Or what was your experience when you came back?

CE: Well, my experience when I came back was that the people who were here weren't getting enough assistance. They didn't have anything for them. They were living in what we called back then, ironing board rooms, and living in the lounge, or—they didn't have any accommodations. I don't know, maybe it's because the University didn't think that they were gonna be bringing those many students back. They weren't prepared. So we had listed 10 demands, and we wanted to meet with the Chancellor by the Union. And it was raining, I heard, but I don't remember that part, but I remember we came inside and we said, 'No, we need somebody other than the—you know, you're not represent—we need the Chancellor.'

So we made him speak into the mic that we had permission to stay in the building. And next thing we knew, here comes the dogs and the police and everything converging on us, and they put us in jail. So, that's what happened.

ES: So you went to jail?

CE: I went to jail, and it was a horrible experience. You know, they put us in trucks and had us in one big jail cell. You know, they were feeding—trying to feed us these crumbled up milk, fake eggs and white bread and fake milk. I said, 'We're not drinking that because they might be trying to poison us,' you know. Yeah, stuff like that. So it was horrible. And they'd send us telegrams and stuff, that, you know, when you get a telegram, it's usually somebody dying or something in your family or something bad. They sent us to him, trying to study, and I'm getting telegrams about this stuff, you know. And we couldn't be there together. They called it mob action if we were two or more of us on campus talking or something. They could arrest us. So I'm speaking on that, and I—that's all in—what I'm telling you is in my presentation. So you getting me ready for my presentation. [They laugh.]

ES: Well talk a little bit more about that. That was after you got out of jail and you came back?

CE: No, no, yeah, when I came back in '68, that's when—the big arrest, they arrested over 220 something students, or something like that. My name was second from the top in the *Chicago Tribune* of the 200 students that got arrested. So, maybe I was so vocal, or something like that, maybe that's why.

ES: You were talking about the telegrams, and when did that—?

CE: That happened after we were arrested.

ES: After you were arrested, after you came back [crosstalk].

CE: We got back to the dorm, we were in there one night. We were in there one night. I walked from the jail, Champaign County jail, to my dorm at ISR. I didn't care. I walked. I'm a walker, anything. So I walked back and went into my room and fell asleep. And my girlfriend, my previous roommate, white

roommate, from the '66 stint, she came and, you know, knocked on the door, and I said, come in. I said, 'I hate white people!' You know.

But my parents had been—we'd been around white people because, we'd been around all different kinds of people. Because my parents, in the summertime, they would come and get us and take us with them on these trips. New York, Canada. So we were used to being around all different kinds of people, you know. So it wasn't like we're coming from the ghetto, as they want to say, you know, we lived in the neighborhood, but we weren't in the quote, you know, ghetto. All the people on our block, parents were teachers and, you know, my parents were—you know, music. So everybody that they say from Project 500, you know, they like to say "disadvantaged." You know. We're just Black people. Regular Black people. So that's, that's what happened.

ES: So after you got back from jail, you went back to your dorm room, then you were talking about, there was—

CE: Telegrams.

ES: —a little bit more.

CE: Yeah, the telegrams.

ES: Who were those from? Just people—

CE: From the courts. I remember going to the court once. I think it was an arraignment. I was young, you know, I don't know what jail—

ES: This is all coming from Champaign?

CE: Yeah, Champaign here. Yeah, Champaign. Champaign. They were sending us telegrams. Don't come to court today. It's been pushed back or whatever. But I do remember going down there once, and I guess that was an arraignment, probably. So here we are. I am on campus trying to study.

ES: Yeah.

CE: And I'm getting telegrams and stuff about this stuff. And it was just so disheartening. It was hard to focus, but I had to keep focusing.

ES: How long did that last? How long did it take to—?

CE: I don't remember. All I remember is one day, you know, they said, I think, I don't even remember if they dismissed the charges while we were still in—I think, yeah, they dismissed the charges. They had to dismiss the charges because we got the guy to speak into the mic, giving us permission to be in the building. We weren't dumb students. We weren't stupid, you know. So they had to let it go. A guy from the community named Stevie Jackson ran out with the tape, and he didn't get arrested. Luckily, he ran out with the tape. They would have probably confiscated the tape.

But I went on. We had more support here then. I took a Yoruba class from a Nigerian language. I can still speak some of it. I showed that [unclear], [Swain laughs] that's a pretty outfit, so I still remember some of this stuff. And ended up living in the community after I graduated, and getting young ladies to—from the young girls from the community, even when I was in school, the early part, from '68 I was over the cultural center dance, the first Black Cultural Center. I worked there under college work study, and taught classes twice a week to get paid. I helped the librarian. We had a library, I put the little things on the—what is that, what is that code you use to stamp the backs of the books, the Dewey system?

ES: Oh, right, right [laughs].

CE: Yeah. I learned how to put stuff like that. And then I did two productions a year for—to get paid. And so these are the little girls that I—that's me.

ES: Oh, wow! We're looking at the Project 500 booklet. Page three. [Laughs.]

CE: Yeah, page three in the booklet, Project 500 booklet. And I called my dance group the Uhuru, which means freedom. U-H-U-R-U. It's a Swahili word for freedom. And then I call these girls the little Uhuru sisters.

ES: And these are community—?

CE: Uh-huh, community girls.

ES: Oh, that's great.

CE: And I worked in the community in 1966 when I first came, a guy used to come pick me up, take me to this place called OIC. Opportunities Industrialization Center. And when I ended up needing a job, when I graduated with my bachelor's in undergraduate, and my bachelor's and master's degree, I was hired at OIC. They remembered me, isn't that something? It was my first job.

ES: Oh, I see. And how long did you do that?

CE: I did that from 1979 to 1981 and I went back to Chicago. I left, I couldn't take the campus and enough was enough. You know, I'd been down here long enough.

ES: Yeah, yeah. Oh, great, great. So talk a little bit about the African American community in town and the students on campus and that relationship. It sounds like you had a strong relationship there.

CE: Yes, I did. We believed in—I did, my brother and some, some other people who, my former husband, we were in this thing called the Pal program.

ES: Pal program?

CE: Pal, P-A-L. Where we would find some young people in the community and just let them come to campus with us. That was so much fun. And I'm still—I still have relationships with them. The Cobs here, and they're grown now. And you know.

ES: Did any of the children come to U of I then, because of your—later?

CE: Huh?

ES: Did any of the children, the Pal children that you brought to campus, did any of them become U of I students later?

CE: I don't think so. I'm not sure, but I do know that—I'm Facebook friends with them, and we're like family members too, still. And after campus, we're still talking about, what were we talking about now here?

ES: Yeah, just—I was talking about, asking you about the relationship with the community, but what other things did you do on campus?

CE: In the community, I—we did, we formed a Harambe Institute. And I forgot what the word Harambe means now, but we found a building and a community next to Douglas Community Center, and we formed, we started. I taught dance, my kid's father taught drumming, karate for the community. And it was free. They said they could pay if they wanted to. But, you know, we did that in the community. I taught an exercise class at Douglas Center.

ES: This is while you were a student?

CE: Mhm. And after I graduated, we, the three of three of us formed—three of us formed a dance company called Artists in Motion. AIM. And so that was really a beautiful experience. Yeah.

ES: So it sounds like you were really involved in arts. Oh, nice.

CE: If it wasn't for the arts and me dancing, I don't know if I would have made it through here.

ES: Really?

CE: Mhm. It was my life. I remember walking on campus on the quad, trying to choreograph dances, you know. [They laugh.] I mean, people probably thought I was—and they step over here and swing this leg up. And so there we are, Artists in Motion.

ES: Oh, that's great. Do you think we could have copies of these?

CE: Yeah.

ES: Oh, that'd be wonderful. We'll put them with the oral history.

CE: Okay.

ES: Wonderful. So were you involved in other groups on campus?

CE: Black Student Association.

ES: What did they do? Tell me about your experience.

CE: Well, they, I think they were formed when my brother was here, when I was here, earlier, later, a little bit after I left. And so in '67 of January. And so anyway, they formed the Black Student Association. And there's a button in my presentation that shows a picture of the BSA. You can have that too, if you want.

ES: Okay, wonderful.

CE: And so the Black Students Association, that was the impetus for this, writing out the demands and everything. After we were arrested—started off at 10, and it ended up being over 60 or 40, or something like that. So we started adding stuff to it, and this is what we want. So I was a heavy member of BSA. I remember cranking off flyers, the old way to crank out flyers, and cranking, my arm was tired passing out flyers on campus. I had that big afro, and they were calling me, 'Here comes little Angela Davis with something.' And I would say, 'Come on to the meeting, we need to talk about what's going on on campus!' I get to the meeting, I see three or four people. That was so discouraging, but I didn't give up. So. [Unclear.]

ES: Yeah, did you have like, a—where did you meet?

CE: We met up in the Union building. They gave us a space up here on the second floor. I go back down there and see if [unclear].

ES: If you can find it. [Laughs.]

CE: Uh-huh. Yeah. So that's what, I did BSA, very active, and did the dancing and cultural stuff.

ES: Did you live in the dorms all?

CE: I lived in the dorms at ISR—

ES: How did that work?

CE: And there were more Black students, so I had a Black roommate. Other times, all three semesters, I had white roommates, but I remember one of them, Donna Brown. She asked me, could I leave out of the room one weekend because her parents were coming, they were Jewish, and they would—knowing that she would have had a black roommate, they would have just disowned her. So I hung—I don't know where I went, I can't remember now, but I stayed out of my dorm for the whole weekend. And when I got—we fixed it up so that the next-door white girl was like, that was her room. Put her pictures up and all that stuff.

ES: Oh my gosh.

CE: I did it for Donna, I liked Donna. She was the one who found me and told me she heard when I, after I got arrested, she was the one knocking at the door. And she said her uncle was a congressman, she was upset. She was gonna tell him about it and see what he could do, stuff like that. So we were good friends, we were roommates. I love her, you know. But then she told me, when the parents left, she said, 'Connie, isn't it really something that we're Jewish and we were discriminated against in a restaurant here. That's very ironic.'

ES: Yeah, and she was worried about—

CE: I mean, I don't blame her. She knew her parents. She wasn't worried. She didn't tell the administration she didn't want a Black roommate.

ES: Right.

CE: You know, it was her parents.

ES: But then they were discriminated against, too.

CE: Yeah. Isn't that something? It's vivid in my head.

ES: Yeah, I bet. That's crazy. Well, um, do you have favorite memories?

CE: Huh?

ES: Do you have favorite memories?

CE: All my dance stuff.

ES: Dancing? Uh-huh, that sounds like it was really [crosstalk].

CE: Dancing. And I ended up with a family here. I married the guy that was drumming, and married him and had two children by him. And I lost my son. We lost our son. He had a motorcycle accident [crosstalk] in 2011 and up in Chicago, and he lived five years for me. I was doing a lot with him, and he passed away in 2016. He was born at Mercy Hospital up there, off of University.

You know, protesting was about the same. I mean, to me, a protest is a protest. We didn't consider a protest, we didn't consider a sit-in, we just wanted some, our help for students that didn't have a place financially. A lot of the students had to go back home even.

And so, anyway. So anyway. We were just standing out there waiting. Nowadays I think there a lot of people are, I don't think they have many student protests like sit-ins or anything like that anymore now. But I do know that people are protesting, walking out of meetings, and the senate hearings, etcetera that's going on now. Speaking up about how they feel about things. That's good to—the people have a voice to say how they feel because after all they're up there for us. They are supposed to represent us and the people of the United States.

And so, we wanted to represent the students who didn't have a place. I had a place because I was here before. I knew the ropes, I had my financial aid, I had a place to stay, I had gotten a roommate from Chicago who's graduated from high school with me, her sister two years later in '68 she was my roommate. I had her as my roommate. You know, I had my room. But we wanted to speak up and speak out for the people who didn't have anything. So that's what happened.

And we were just like sitting in there waiting for the chancellor to come. It wasn't, 'We're gonna—let's go do the sit-in!'

ES: And that's the main protest you remember while you were here, that you were involved in?

CE: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

ES: Or you said it was more like a sit-in than a protest?

CE: Yeah, it was, we considered it a sit-in. We weren't trying to sit somewhere and make, to make people make us move. You see, a sit-in that was during those times, you'd go sit in a building and not move because you were protesting something or other, whatever your protest was or whatever. Whatever you wanted to let people know there were inaccuracies in life about different treatment, how people were treated differently.

So you have free speech to be able to do that. But they do arrest you when you are sitting in some of these protests [unclear]. Even on the street they arrest people, some people get killed. [Unclear] car plunged in to them you know, and stuff like that. So these things are dangerous, like somebody could've gotten hurt. They said the dogs were outside when we were in the Union. I wasn't going to go outside. And they came in with these billy clubs looked like bats. And I had never seen a billy club that big in my life. Coming in with bats. So somebody could've gotten hurt, you know. So they are dangerous things.

But ours wasn't a sit-in type situation. We were just waiting for the chancellor to come and speak to us. We didn't have anywhere else to wait. All the classrooms were shut down, it was in the evening.

So talk about comparing then and now and stuff. I remember that in Kent State some of the students were—that happened when I was in college—some of the students were protesting. They shot into the crowd and killed some students. Killed them. And our, our professors were really upset so if you were gonna get a B, you got an A. [Both laugh.] If you were gonna get a C, you got a B. I'm serious. The instructors, the professors were really upset about that. How could you just shoot and kill people, some students. Young students. How could you do that? And at Kent State just stuck in my mind. So you see people can get shot and killed. They didn't shoot rubber bullets, they were just shooting guns—shooting into the crowd. Come on now. Of young people trying to speak up for themselves.

ES: So do you have any advice for current students or graduating seniors based on your experience?

CE: I have advice for the university when he said that last night. That we need—the chancellor gave an Illinois commitment to bring more students in through paying their tuition and fees, but we need, like I said last night, we need actually student recruiters to go target that population. And get them down here and have financial aid and stuff for them and housing. That's what we need, that's what's needed. I

mean yeah, we did it in ’68 and now we need to do it in 2018 and beyond. Because if I think about the enrollment, it’s a horrible feeling for some people who haven’t really traveled the world like my brother and I did to come some place and try to study and you don’t see too many people that look like you.

You don’t see the culture, you don’t see the courses that are—like they had the Black history, I was able to take Urhobo. As a matter of fact, I had a Urhobo wedding. My instructor came to Chicago and married me. Traditional. I made my African garb for him, my ex-husband and for myself. You know, and that’s what we need now. I mean, it’s like it’s getting worse. I don’t know whether it’s getting worse or getting better. You see what I’m saying?

I know that some things changed as a result of us being here. Because I went to my dorm where we used to sit by the—in the cafeteria. I saw my door and I said, ‘Let’s sit by the door so if they come in and try to arrest us again we can run out. We gotta have an escape route.’ And when I came down here 35 years later, the 35th anniversary, I went back to [unclear] and Black students were still sitting there.

ES: They were still sitting there.

CE: And they didn’t even know it, why they were sitting there. I told them. Isn’t that amazing? And then the lady—

ES: Wow. Did it just become a tradition?

CE: Yeah.

ES: Wow.

CE: And then I, one of the mothers to the little girl that I used to teach, they texted me now and told me how they really remember. I used to have them to my house and teach them things. They still remember me from that. The mother, Dr. Underwood, she said they really—I left an impact on their lives. I was more impact on the students, the people in the community, probably than the campus. But people were applauding me last night when I was up there doing my dancing and things at the ceremony last night. And talking about what I did on campus dancing and stuff like that. I impacted—and I was a strong woman on campus. A strong student. They looked up to my brother and they looked up to me.

ES: That’s great. [Unclear.] Is there anything else you want to say?

CE: That’s it. I’m about to cry. [Laughs.]

ES: Well thank you so much. We really appreciate it.