

University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives
Project 500 Anniversary Oral History Project
Karl Huff
Urbana, Illinois
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Bethany Anderson: Okay well today is September 28th, 2018, and I'm Bethany Anderson from the University of Illinois Archives, and I'm here today with Karl Huff and Karl if you'd like to do a brief intro.

Karl Huff: Sure, I'm Karl Huff. I graduated from the University of Illinois 1972 FAA Music Education BS in music ed. I got my masters the very next year '73 at Howard University, Washington DC, and I finished my doctoral work, so I have an EDD in secondary education music from Arizona State University and I've been living in Phoenix, Arizona since 1978.

BA: Oh wow. Okay. Well great, thank you for talking with me today, Karl, I really appreciate it. So, I am going ahead to ask you a couple of questions about your time here at the U of I. So, first of all, you already kind of alluded to this, but what years did you attend the U of I?

KH: I was here '68 to, fall of '68, through summer of '72.

BA: Okay. And how did you decide on the U of I? Did you consider attending any other schools?

KH: I actually did not. When I was coming out of high school, I liked the sound of the University of Illinois. I checked their programs. At the time, I was an excellent math and science major in high school. Always took math, science courses; president of the chemical honors society, the physics club, the biology club, so I came here freshman, accepted into the College of Engineering.

BA: Oh wow. Okay. Wow yeah, I am actually the archivist for the College of Engineering, so I work a lot with the records so that's very exciting to be talking to someone who was in engineering. So, could you talk a bit about what the climate was like when you arrived here on campus?

KH: Oh, I remember my first day was on a Sunday, I arrived. And I had been to visit the campus earlier. I actually spent a weekend on the campus during my spring break of my senior year in high school, so I was generally familiar with the campus. So, when I got here on a Sunday, classes started I think on a Wednesday, so I was a couple of days early. I had already registered, had my classes, had my room assignment and so on, had met my new roommate. He was from the Chicago area, an engineering student. The climate to me at that time was very calm, but I noticed that they had many of the minority students, the black students and some Hispanics,

didn't have rooms, but they had been accepted much later than myself. So, I was pretty much one of the normal admits if there is such a thing as normal at the university level. And so, I had a room and obviously my roommate and I had a room. So, they were sitting in at the campus, my second day on campus because they didn't have rooms and so although the overall campus climate was calm and normal, it looked like many of the minority students had a problem because they didn't have a room. Some didn't have a room; some were in corner sewing rooms; some were in rooms that didn't even have a lock on the door. So, there was a dichotomy going on at that time.

BA: So how long, just out of curiosity did that sit in last that you said started on your second day here?

KH: It lasted all night. I got here September 7th at night so September 8th and 9th. So, the sit in started on September 8th and lasted until September 9th until the morning when approximately 244 students were arrested. I had been at that sit-in, but I had a room so at about 1:30 at night, I ended up going back to my room and found out the next morning that a couple hundred of students had been arrested who were at the same sit in I was at the night before.

BA: That leads me to my next question. I was going to ask you if you did participate in the September 10th, 1968, sit-in, and you already described that event a bit. What kind of impact do you think it had, if any?

KH: Well, it kind of probably, in my opinion of course, it opened the eyes of the university. It was a very noble thing to do, to accept and have these students come here, but they weren't fully prepared. Maybe they didn't think all of the students they invited would actually come. I don't know. I wasn't on that end, but I do know, from the students' point of view, that now that we're here, we should be treated just like any other student, and you know accommodations should be made and I remember one thing that they were told that was the problem with the students is that they were told to just wait. Just wait. They weren't told how long they should wait, but just wait and since many of them had traveled from Chicago, East St. Louis, St. Louis, Philadelphia, New York, some as far as even California, that they need you know wait; that's good but how long and exactly what are we waiting for? Are you actually going to place us? Maybe if things had been explained; if somebody had just come out and just talked to them. It's almost like they were being ignored, we were being ignored. Many of them, sitting here at the union, at least gave them a sense of belonging. They knew they were at the union, we're here at the university, we're at the union, please deal with us. And in my opinion, they dealt with them by taking them to jail the next morning.

BA: So, I wanted to talk a bit about your time in other areas at the university, once you were established here, so I wanted to ask if you were involved in any student organizations such as the Black Student Association?

KH: I was in a number of student organizations. The Black Students Association was one. I was a member of my dorm council. I was a member of the Student Advisory Council to the Dean of Housing. Very much that first year. I was also a member. Over the summer I had even auditioned for the concert band. So, I was in one of the concert bands. I was in the marching band. At that time, it was all men, 175 marching band members, all men, and I was the only black face in the group. And so that was, you know, it didn't bother me, cause I still had made friends in the band. I mean everybody who played at that time. I was in saxophone, tenor, saxophone and baritone sax, and so I had friends in the band and so I was a member of those groups. So, dorm council, a Black Student Association. I even later moved up in the Black Student Association, became one of their officers. I was over publicity, and it was, you know, it was nice being a part of something and you know the university had a lot of things going on.

BA: So, you already mentioned some of these other activities, but were you involved in any other extracurricular activities you know, such as arts or sports while you were here and can you describe that experience?

KH: Well, I was a member of intramural sports, yes. Cause we had we had a dorm team, and my floor, we organized a team and I actually ended up like co-captain of the dorm basketball team, so we and we were involved in intramural sports because none of us were, you know, varsity. They were already scholarshiped and picked, but since you know I grew up across the street from a park in Chicago, so whatever was in season I played that sport from football, baseball, basketball. I actually had played baseball, a number of years in Chicago. And so, when I got here and they said, well, you know, we could have a dorm team. Each floor could have their own team if they wanted. We actually did organize one second floor Hopkins Hall had, and we had our own team and we played intramural.

BA: So, could you describe some of your favorite memories?

KH: Well, some of my favorite memories, obviously were probably not going to class. [They laugh.] It had to do with the extra things. Like for example here at the Union I remember being here and right down the hall at a couple of parties right at the Illini Union first week there was a student mixer, all freshmen were invited, and I went. And I was meeting people. And you know I would. I've always been a social person. So, it was easy for me to go out and meet people. All I had to do, I love to dance and since I got in last night and one of the people that I saw last night reminded me of that, and she didn't really need to because I still like to dance. You know, I'm lucky enough that I'm still physically able to do that and so for me, it's almost it's still it's very physical. It's, you know, physical exercise. It's a recreation. I still dance. I'm still a performing musician and I'm lucky enough at 67 that I can still get up and get around on my own and so it's not a problem. So, some of the fondest memories coming right here to the Student Union to student mixers and dances.

BA: So, do you think protest tactics, philosophies, and so forth related to Project 500 differ from those used in other protests at the time, or even protests happening today and how so?

KH: Well, at the time, no. I think we were, we were all right with the time. I mean sit-ins were the thing. I mean, this was 1968 and sit-ins had been going on since the early 60s all over the country from lunch counters in North Carolina and Alabama and so to sit-in; this in our mind was a peaceful way to protest. We're going to sit here until you come and address us and tell what you're going to do to help us from the situation that you put us in. You know the university invited all of these students by accepting them. Now, if you're going to accept them, then when they get here, I'm going to guess, there should be a place for them and to sit and peacefully protest until somebody tells what they're going to do to me is the right thing to do. Now we weren't tearing up anything. I don't think there was any destruction, and if so, it was minor if any, but I don't remember anything being destroyed, no windows being broken. Nothing being torn up chairs being thrown around, nothing like that. Peaceful protest that ended with 244 students going to jail, in my opinion, the university grossly overreacted to students sitting and at 2:00 or 3:00 o'clock in the morning sleeping in the student union. That was a grave overreaction of the administration at that time that all they needed to do was send somebody from the President's office out to talk to the students and tell them this is a timeline of what's going to happen and even maybe a brief description on how they dropped the ball. Cause I'm guessing that they didn't expect that many students to show up. You invite them, you accept them and then they show up. And then you don't know what to do with them. You can't blame the students for that. That's a university problem. That's easy to see and from the students' point of view, when they protested peacefully and then ended up in jail. It's probably why all of the charges were dismissed.

BA: Yeah, yeah, they realized their error maybe too late.

KH: Yeah, and in my I remember that I can't remember exactly who it was, but it might have been one of the law students at the time. When he realized, let me let me take a minor step back. One of the reasons why I left that night late 'cause it was after midnight when I left. I remember seeing a campus policeman on a walkie-talkie looking extremely nervous, frazzled and rattled. And I saw him pacing and talking on his walkie-talkie and at the time I bumped one of my high school classmates who had been accepted and was down and said, you know, you've got a room and I've got a room. I'm going back to my room and sleep in a bed rather than sleep here on the floor. And he said, "OK, I'll see you in the morning," and he did when he called me from jail. Could I please come and try to get him out? He even gave me directions, go to my room, tell my roommate who you are, get my checkbook, told, me where it was. Write yourself a check, cash it, come get me out. And the two of us, we had rooms that he stayed to help the protest and I felt like I didn't want to sleep on a floor. And so, I went back to my room. And he called me at that time. So, to me, the university grossly overreacted because this was a peaceful protest where there was not a riot going on, and so were we in line with what was going on at the time? Yes, because this was the Vietnam era. There were lots and lots of protests that were much stronger than sitting in the Union building. That was fairly common in many, many universities. They probably, if we did our research, we could see that they were very. It's probably easier to find a major university that didn't have that kind of a protest than you would find it wouldn't. So, it's not like they shouldn't have been able to figure it out, but again, in my opinion they grossly overreacted to what was going on cause this was a peaceful protest.

BA: Yeah, was there any, just out of curiosity, was there any sort of news coverage after the fact that really addressed that point? And really, you know realized you know this was

a peaceful protest and you know the university had overreacted. Did you see any sort of press after the fact that?

KH: I saw a number of press and luckily enough, one of my roommate, my junior-senior year, was a journalism major and he actually kept many of the articles and I, he may be coming in soon, and he's still got some of the press clippings cause he kept them as a as a journalist, you know, it's like his little black book, so to speak so he can probably speak to that more than I do, but having known and having been there, you know there again I have to just keep reiterating that they grossly overreacted because - oh, and what I was about to say before one of them, one of the law students, when he realized that they were kind of lining up trucks and wagons to take the students off to incarcerate them. 244 students, I think officially got arrested that night and the Champaign Urbana jails weren't equipped to take in that many people that quickly, so some of them were locked into the stadium. [BA: Oh, really?] So, and actually what I was about - I keep leaving this bit out. One of the law students knew that this was about to happen, and he had talked to the police saying look, many of the girls just let them go back to the dorms and arrest the guys. If you're going to take somebody in taking the guy, you gotta make a statement. And so, they did lead that I heard. They led the girls out first, but they led the girls right into the paddy wagons and took them straight to jail even though he had talked to them and they of course, told him, "Yes well, we can do that for you." That's reasonable, since there's it's not a violent type of action we will, like you know, almost like letting the women and children go. Well, they didn't do that, they just said yes to keep things calm while they escorted everyone that was involved that looked like they were involved with the protest, and so that again, shows kind of a lack of trust and faith. I mean, if you say you're going to do this and then let the women go out first. Then why is it you you know? Okay? I understand you're trying to keep calm, keep everybody calm but you know you might as well have just herded everybody out like cattle. If you're gonna take him to jail, just take him to jail. Why be nice and say okay, the ladies can go out first we'll take you to jail first. That's so nice of us to let you go and I even talked to some of the, I remember some of the girls said that there were so many of them in the cell, there was no way to sit down. They were crammed in the cell standing room only and they were given like an egg salad sandwich or just an egg sandwich. I'm not even sure there was an egg salad. So, an egg and a piece of bread was their breakfast the next morning before they were let out.

BA: Yeah, so I wanted to ask you if you had, you know, based on you know, reflecting on your experience here as a student and if you have any advice for incoming freshmen or graduating seniors?

KH: Well, yes. Get involved because when I look back what kept me centered was I like to play an instrument, which is why, of course I eventually became a music major. It's like I had this C average first year or year and a half. If I got a B. I got a D to keep it a C, but I had an A or B in band always. And so, you know, follow your own dreams. And that so I tell the freshmen, definitely. Find what you like and become a member of an organization that you can be part of that fosters that. And I would tell the seniors, prepare yourself to go out and do some work in your area and nowadays it's like some of the people they don't understand, or you don't start at the top just because you've got a degree, you you're still gonna have to start as a, you know, intern, journeyman type position. You're gonna have to get some experience and be ready to do some work. You know. Now that you've got a degree nobody is going to just say, "Oh come,

we're gonna make you the boss." No, that's not how real-life works. You're going to have to do some work. Hopefully you've chosen an area you like so that you can make it your life's work and if not, you need to find it soon. Otherwise, you're going to be miserable until you do.

BA: Yeah, that's great advice. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

KH: Well, in general, obviously the university has helped make me who I am. Going back to that first week, you know, like I said, within my first 24 hours, I'm gonna get a call from one of my friends to come get him out of jail and leaving Chicago, knowing, having friends there go to jail, having friends being injured by police to get away from that, thinking I'm getting away from that. I'm going to a safe learning environment and then to see the same thing within the first 24 hours that I arrived on campus was not the way I thought college was going to start and to be, but it put me on notice that just because I've moved to a different location doesn't mean things have changed. To this day as I look around campus I don't see that what we did then, the impact actually has made a major change. It made a temporary change for then, but I could see some of the same things that, where they need to continue on. I mean if we look at the minority black population, specifically in this state, is it represented here at the university? I think not, and that they need to continue programs. Let me give a better example. There are probably students and people here in this area that think a program like SEOP program is a handout, but they don't know that four years after Project 500, so 68 to 72, the black graduation rate was better than twice the regular student academic graduation rate. The regular student graduation rate here is 30 was at that time about 33%. We graduated 66 to 68% of the students who had started that first year were there four years later to graduate. Now if that's not a success, I don't know how you would gauge success. And so, is that a handout? I would say no. And so, if whatever the percentage of minorities are in this state, this major state school should be representative of that number, because those students, if they're given a chance, they're going to succeed. All they knew we needed was a chance.

BA: Well, thank you for sharing your stories from your time as a student here and your perspectives. And I really appreciate your time, Karl. Thank you again.

KH: Thank you.