

University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives
Project 500 Anniversary Oral History Project
Raynard Hall
Urbana, Illinois
September 29, 2018

Heidi Charles: This is an oral history for the student life and culture archives. My name is Heidi Charles, and I am here with Raynard Hall, an alum of the University of Illinois. We are at the Illini Union, and it is September 29th, 2018. So, let's get started. Raynard, what years did you attend the UofI?

Raynard Hall: I started at the University in September of 1968. I finished in May of 1974 with a degree in Communications Advertising.

HC: Okay, and how did you decide to come to the University of Illinois?

RH: Where I always knew that I wanted to go to college, and I had decent grades in high school and certainly my high school counselors prepared us for college. My parents, my mother never finished high school. My father was a businessman and really wanted me to come into the family business, so my father was not very strong on me spending four years away from home anywhere, going to college and literally discouraged it. My high school counselor suggested I check out the University of Illinois because it was fairly close and I did I came down a few times during the summer of 1968, I had applied of course and had gotten accepted. I came down a few times and that kind of sealed the deal for me. I liked it here and I decided I would come.

HC: Okay. What was the climate like when you arrived on campus?

RH: Well, when I got here the first thing I was surprised to find out that I was part of Project 500 because I wasn't offered any scholarships or any money. I had gotten in on my own grades and I was kind of happy that so many other blacks were going to be going to school here at the same time and that was good. We came down a week early we were all invited down. I believe it was one week, it might have even been two weeks early to get oriented so that was good. The first week or so on campus it was mostly just us new black students on campus and that gave us kind of a comfortable feel and then of course when the campus began to fill up with the regular student body it got different quickly and we could tell we were greatly outnumbered by the normal student population so it was an adjustment for us, for me personally although I had gone to a somewhat integrated high school, Lindblom Technical High School in Chicago. I had been around white people before. I never actually had to live and eat and sleep around so many white people and so there was an adjustment period. It was a short adjustment for me because I'm fairly comfortable with everybody and so that part of it was cool. The thing you have to remember I think is the time period. 1968, 1969 in particular. Those were very tumultuous years. There was a lot going on for young people in particular. Young people were at the vanguard of thinking about and talking about change, even radical change, revolutionary change and if

you were a reader of contemporary thought and if you were plugged in in any way to contemporary culture you were a part of that, and I certainly was so all of that was in the atmosphere.

HC: Did you participate in the September 10th, 1968 sit-in at the Union?

RH: You know, yes I did and I suppose you could fairly call it a sit-in but for those of us who participated it was not so much a riot, a sit-in, a protest, a disturbance as, we were hoping to make a statement to the University about the treatment of a few students we thought and also an issue with some peoples financial aid packages and some other issues but we were sitting around talking and playing cards and literally waiting for someone from the president's office to come and talk to us. We had been told that if we waited quietly, someone was going to come and explain everything to us and answer all of our questions. So you called it a sit-in, it was more like a wait-in. We were waiting for someone to come and talk to us. What happened was, as the kids say now, well what had happened was you see the police showed up instead of the representative from the Chancellor's office and carted a bunch of us off to jail and it was reported the next day far and wide in the press that it was a riot, it was a big disturbance but even in taking us off to jail it was very peaceful there just wasn't any great disturbance.

HC: Do you think that he event had any impact in your opinion at the time?

RH: Again, I think you have to put it in perspective. Dr. King had just been assassinated about three months prior, a little more than three months prior. We, myself and others, had experienced walkouts at our high school. We had experienced real rioting in the streets. I'm from Chicago. I lived on the South side. So, we'd seen real protests, real riots, actual real destruction and the event of September was nothing like any of that. So, I mean not even comparable really, so it didn't have the impact that you would think. If anything, it put us on guard that the University was not always going to play fair with us. We were expecting a representative from the University to come and talk to us. Instead, we saw the police. So it kind of put us on guard in that sense and if anything, it kind of fed into our radical or revolutionary narrative that you can't trust anybody over thirty. I don't know if you've heard that statement but at that time, I'm seventeen years old, a teenager away from home for the first time. That kind of idea was very much in the air, you can't trust anybody over thirty, it felt very much like that.

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

RH: Well, I lived in the dorm for only six months and then I moved into the Kappa Alpha Psi house. I pledged Kappa in my second semester. I got made in my second semester and lived in the Kappa house for the next two years, so Kappa was my number one student organization and became a big part of my campus life and my campus identity as well. I also was a member of the panhellenic association, and I had a great interest in what the Black Student Association was doing but I wasn't an active member until my senior year. My senior year I did become somewhat more active in the BSA. In fact I took a minor leadership role.

HC: And that would have been 1972?

RH: For me, my senior year was 74 so much later.

HC: Okay and were you involved in extracurricular activities such as sports or the arts?

RH: No. Not so much for me. Kappa Alpha Psi took up a lot of my time. We were very social. In fact, we were probably the social leaders on campus, so we did a lot of social activities. Parties and networking and that kind of stuff. As a young man I played a lot of basketball, a lot of unorganized basketball so I spent a lot of time on the basketball court. At the old man's gym and also over at a court over on Springfield at the park. Then we had an experience, Kappas did, in 1971 our house was, which was at 707 South 3rd Street, the house that the fraternity had owned since 1937 was mysteriously burned to the ground. It wasn't such a great mystery actually because witnesses saw the project manager for the building directly across the street from us, they were building the highest, the tallest building in central Illinois. Century 21, a twenty-one-story high rise, the first one in Champaign. The first high rise building in Central Illinois, and they needed space to build a parking lot. In order to build that parking lot, they literally, their project manager was seen leaving the scene of our house, burning, with a gas can. As a result of witnesses seeing this guy leave our property burning with a gas can, we were able to take Century 21 ownership to court and negotiate enough money in settlement to buy the first house that a black fraternity has ever owned on Greek Row at 402 East Armory, and we owned that house for about thirty years afterwards and that house came with a basketball court. So, I played a lot of basketball out behind the new Kappa house as well.

HC: Okay, yeah. I'm glad that it all worked out in the end, but that must've been very sad.

RH: That was one of my saddest but as it worked out, one of my greatest memories of being here as well.

HC: Okay, and can you talk about some of your other favorite memories from being a student?

RH: Again in my senior year 1974, I became active in the BSA and I also became active in the panhell group and played a leadership role like I mentioned. We put on a senior week production, and I was very involved in that. We had a band come down. I think it was part of Funkadelic. And so, there was a big weekend I had an opportunity to speak to parents and that was a pretty big weekend for me. I enjoyed doing that. And there was so many, almost too many to mention weekends where I believe I couldn't have had more fun. There were, campus life for me, being a part of a fraternity was work hard, study all week, and on Friday, put the books away and do whatever you want to do until Sunday night until you had to study again and prepare for Monday and that literally was how my weeks were organized, if I stayed in town. There were a couple of years where I think I might've been gone almost every weekend. I did a lot of traveling while I was a student as well all around the country. I never had the opportunity as a student to leave the country, but I certainly visited college campuses all over the Midwest and the South and the East.

Often with very little money, but being a Kappa, I was able to plug into that network and I just had so much fun. It was really a great time.

HC: So, do you think protest tactics, philosophies, etc. related to Project 500 differ from those used in other protests at the time?

RH: Well, no not really. I think the tools that we were aware of then were generally used by black students, white students, everybody. In fact, I think the white students probably learned from the civil rights protests of the late 50s and 60s and emulated those tactics. Even today, much of the protests are still based on the same basic models. What's different today of course is social media makes all the difference in the world. I mean we would have to print up a thousand flyers and stand on street corners and talk loud and pass them out and try to get attention and now in a matter of minutes you can do the same thing ten thousand times better in a fraction of the time and a fraction of the cost too so that's a big difference between then and now but the basic models remain the same. Find a way to put pressure on the system at some point where you have enough control to hurt the system whether it's economically, whether it's socially, whether it's politically, pinch them enough to make them say ow, and if you can make them say ow, then at least you can start a conversation and hopefully make enough sense to make your point and I think that that's gonna prevail as a model for protestors throughout time. I mean if you aren't wealthy, then you have to depend on your numbers to be successful. You have to be able to organize people to stand behind you and try to make a point. If you got a lot of money, it's different.

HC: Okay, and wrapping up, do you have any advice for incoming freshman and graduating seniors?

RH: If I were talking to a group of incoming freshmen right now I'd say the most important thing you can do while you're here for four years, make friends. You can't get through college by yourself. I mean you can get in the books but at some point you're gonna need help. You're gonna need help understanding something. You're gonna need help understanding the system that you're working in. You're gonna need help understanding the industry or business or occupation that you intend to go into after you finish college so talk to somebody who knows a little bit more than you do about what it is you hope to do. Make friends. And if you were a graduating senior. I would say to you, make friends. Network, try to get an internship while you're still a student. That's the most important thing you can do. Try to get some experience before you leave school in the industry that you intend to work in. It'll make finding a job easier. It'll make doing that job easier and you'll be more comfortable doing it because you have a few friends already in the business. So if I had some advice to give a college student today, I'd say, make friends.

HC: Great, well thank you for your time and I think we're going to conclude the interview here.

RH: Alright, thank you. It's been my pleasure.