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Anthony Gray

Anthony Gray '98

Illinois Wesleyan University

Rae Rein 2011

Illinois Wesleyan University

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Homecoming 2010, recorded at The Ames Library

Rae Rein: My name is Rein, I'm the Class of 2011. I'm a Political Science major.

Tony Gray: And I'm Gray, Class of 1998, International Studies major, Political Science minor.

Rein: Okay, what questions stuck out to you when you were reading them?

Gray: I guess—

Rein: Are you one of the people that's here to talk about diversity through the Multicultural—

Gray: Mhmm.

Rein: What was it like on campus when you were a student?

Gray: When I was a student in '98 from a multicultural standpoint, we were considered kind of a bigger class as far as African American students. There was about twenty of us that came in together. It was a unique time because of the twenty, three of us came from the same high school as I—(**unsure of name of high school??**), which is where I went to high school. It was an interesting climate because, in my opinion, there's a group of people that were indifferent from a diversity standpoint and I'm talking both minority and majority students and then just everywhere else in the world there is a small faction of people that had negative views or racist or bigot views toward minorities but then there is a whole larger group of people that just didn't know, and that made it for a very unique and interesting place to be because there are times where we had the ability to educate minority—majority students about cultural issues and about the day-to-day life of minority students, not necessarily on campus but just in general living in Chicago or living in North Carolina or living wherever, and that made it unique. Within the minority students themselves, there was definitely a—kind of a fraction of students that came more from a very strong Afro-centric or very minority-centric background either at predominately minority high schools or predominately—or very, I don't want to use the word militant, but very more aggressive or agitated or defensive is probably the best word to use and then there's a group of students, I think myself was part of, that went to, you know, either majority white high schools or mixed high schools and so the culture shock that you see from some students—there is either those that experience it and those that didn't, so...

Rein: Were the majority of students receptive when you tried to educate them?

Gray: For the most part, yes, in my experience. I used to tell people that oftentimes you'll find teachable moments that happen in the dorm room or happen in the fraternity house or sorority house or on the practice field. The question that you get sometimes on the face of them can easily be taking—taken as racist questions or racist statements, but when you look in the person's eye and realize that the genuineness of where they're coming from, it's like, "Oh, they really don't know." The number of times I was asked about the difference between a white student or a white person and a black person's hair, it makes me laugh now, it made me laugh then as it was one of those, "You really don't understand it," and so that was a very—there's a very strong balancing line that I think minority students have to deal with—is being not only able to understand what was going on but to understand it in the context of where it was happening, that is it wasn't happening in—from a racist place or from a negative place, it was coming from a place of unknown now, "Ignorance is bliss," so to speak and Wesleyan, I think, forced people and pushed people to get away from their ignorance and question things and sometimes the questions were questions that you weren't expected to have. The number of people that I've met

that—on campus—where I was the first African American that they'd ever talked to or introduced to or became friends with, it's—and some of those are still some of my closest friends today, but it definitely made for interesting conversation—

[Both laugh]

Gray: At the time.

Rein: Do you—so how do you think their understanding of diversity and did your understanding of diversity change having all of those—

Gray: It did. My understanding of diversity definitely changed when I was here, I mean, in—when I was on campus here I joined a fraternity and I thought I had a pretty diverse musical background but even just something as simple as music opened up a whole new world of Grateful Dead and Phish and things that I never even considered to be in the realm of music and so, in my opinion, diversity takes a lot of different places. It—you know, it's not just cultural, it's not just ethnic, it's economic, it's also sexual orientation. When I was here as a student, the Pride group kind of changed to what became for a while the GSA, Gay Straight Alliance, and I was very proud to be one of the founding officers in the Gay Straight Alliance and to help push diversity in that front. I think the biggest change that I found within myself is the true realization that diversity issues don't get pushed without actually the minority groups challenging their thought process themselves and that's, for me, African Americans challenging the way African Americans think and what our ideas and expectations are and they also don't improve without the majority students, the majority of the country, understanding it, embracing it, and realizing that it's not about the differences there are, it's about why we need to be—there's certain balancing lines that you have to have, so when I came to campus, I was more of the, you know, it's kind of—you see it just as us against them. It wasn't—I didn't feel that way but that's kind of your idea of diversity is that we're here, they're there, they're there, and everybody stays in their own bucket and I think coming to Wesleyan really opened up the avenues to interact and to play together.

Rein: How do the minority students have to change their thought process?

Gray: I, in my personal opinion, I don't think it's minority students exclusively—

Rein: Well—

Gray: I think it's minorities in general but specifically on campus in as well, you know, there's a sense of racial entitlement that permeates through the minority communities in my experience of African American—especially African American guys' psyche. We've had to endure these things for so many years that there's that buildup of somebody owes us something and while nobody will actually say that somebody owes us something, it comes out in how things react or how people react to different things, you know, just in modern culture today, you have situations like Don Imus and what's his name, Keith Richards, the comedian, the guy that used to be on *Seinfeld*, you know, up in arms when something happens when a minority person or a white person in everyday walks of life says something or does something that appears to be extremely racist. Floyd Mayweather did the exact same thing to the Filipino community against Manny Pacquiao and you haven't heard anything about it and it's stuff like that that, "Well, if it comes from their side, everyone gets up in arms but when it comes from our side, it's just, you know, well we have a right to be that way." Well, no we don't...[laughs]...no one has a right to be that way and no one has a right to say those things and I think that's where the thought process has to

change—is that there’s not an expected hierarchy of how you act. The things that African Americans say that are inappropriate are inappropriate. The things that majority students say that are inappropriate are inappropriate. The color of that doesn’t matter and that’s what I try—when I talk to younger people, when I talk to older people, when I just talk about race it’s that’s where I draw the line, you know, right is right, wrong is wrong, color is regardless and I think the university would do itself really well to continue that line of communication and line of thought.

Rein: We’ve covered a lot of the diversity questions.

Gray: You can ask me anything you want.

Rein: Yeah. I was interested in the questions that people would ask you and some of those encounters.

Gray: One of my favorite is a fraternity brother of mine who—I’ll leave his name out—but he and I were—we lived in the same suite as freshman in Dodds and the other African American male that—from my high school and I were roommates initially and both of our fathers—or my roommate’s father—or my roommate his self played football at Wesleyan, so he was a big guy, not enormously big but, you know, I was really small. I’m still small but both of our fathers who brought us to campus were really big guys.

[Both laugh]

Gray: You know, my dad is 6’1”, 250, pretty solid, 240 is pretty solid, you know, his dad was 6’1”-6’2”, 250, pretty solid and just can—they both have the ability to look—just look mean.

[Rein laughs]

Gray: And this guy walks into the suite in Dodds and the look on his face—I don’t know if it was—if it—at the time I didn’t know if it was fear, if it was uncomfortableness, it was surprise, or what it was, but it was something and we all knew it. We didn’t say anything about it, you know, but what I loved about it is that he didn’t play on those things, didn’t play on the things that he saw on *Cops* on TV, which was popular, you know, and he’s from Central Illinois and very small town and, you know, he didn’t play on those things when he—when we were—lived together. He just—we just opened each other up, opened our arms and talked about whatever—he would ask us all types of questions about what it’s like growing up, comparing things that he would see on TV and then say, “Is that really the reality?” We would just sit there for hours and just talk about the myths and the rumors and the things that you hear and you think and, you know, he dispelled a lot of myths for us like not all people from Central Illinois are racist. They’re not, they’re really not.

[Both laugh]

Gray: You know, but when you’re in Chicago and you don’t know anything different, you come with your own interpretations. Well he and I became fraternity brothers, we pledged the same time, and he’s still one of my good friends today and we’re getting ready to graduate and he finally acknowledged what we all thought and he’s like, he goes, “It is amazing that you and I are just as good a friends as we are,” and he goes, “When I first walked into our dorm—” and I go, “I know, we all saw it. We all saw the look on your face.” He goes, “My dad asked me if it was okay for him to leave me, like we were—me and my family were terrified and we didn’t know what to think.” He goes, “You guys—you, him, and your fathers were the first four

African Americans I'd ever physically seen in my life," and he goes, "Tony, you're not that big but the other three of those guys—"

[Both laugh]

Gray: "Were pretty big because we were terrified," and he goes, "but you recognize and you learn and you kind of go along with it," and, you know, I tell that story a hundred times and it's—it makes me laugh every time because you don't know and you see a lot of different things and if you open your eyes and open your mind and open your heart to it, you realize the goodness in people and Wesleyan was really good. When you put yourself in position to have that interaction cross-culturally, it's actually a really good place because I've always said at the end of the day, if you look at the quality of students that come to Wesleyan, everywhere there's ability for a bad apple to fall into the bunch but 90-95% of them are good people and there's a connectivity because of such a small campus that makes the ability to have these conversations easier here even at the outset when it's difficult but if you just—and I've told students in the past, I mean, just take a step back and have a conversation and just see where it takes you. It's—it goes through some pretty interesting places, so that's my—one of my favorite stories from when I was here.

Rein: I think that's a pretty good note to end on.

Gray: Okay.

Rein: I wanted to thank you for coming in today and talking with us.

Gray: You're very welcome. Anytime.