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Debra Burt-Frazier

Debra Burt-Frazier '75
Illinois Wesleyan University

Yemaya Jennings 2017
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Oral History Interview with Debra Burt-Frazier, Class of 1975

July 12, 2017

Debra Burt-Frazier: Hello?

Yemaya Jennings: Hello, is this Debra?

Burt-Frazier: Yes, it is!

Jennings: Hi Debra. My name is Yemaya. I'm whom you've been emailing with.

Burt-Frazier: Oh, hi, Yemaya. I was expecting your call.

Jennings: Yes, yes. Thank you so much for agreeing to chat with me today. I really appreciate it.

Burt-Frazier: Oh, you're welcome. I – I tried to find the email that Meg had send me with the questions and I guess I must have deleted it or something, Yemaya, so you're going to have to give me some of those questions again.

Jennings: Oh, of course. We can just – we can just chat it out right now. I have them in front of me.

Burt-Frazier: Okay, good.

Jennings: Great. So if you'd like to start off maybe by introducing yourself and just telling us a bit about your affiliation with Illinois Wesleyan.

Burt-Frazier: Okay. My name is Debra Renee Burt-Frazier, class of 1975, of IWU. I obtained my Bachelors of English in Journalism back in May of that year and...after that I went on to earn my Masters degree from Chicago State University in English Literature and about 4 years ago I completed my studies for my Ph. D. or my E.D.D. – Educational Leadership – my Ph. – my doctorate in Educational Leadership from Argosy University in Chicago. And since my graduation from Wesleyan, I have attempted to stay actively involved – coming back home for homecoming. I think it was my first one when I was 5 years out, 1980 and then 10 years, 1985. I feel as if like maybe a period of, you know, not coming back every year but you know, intermittently, until the Minority Alumni Network was instituted and I'm a charter member of it. We are celebrating our 25th anniversary... I'm sure our anniversary is this homecoming... and back then, I spent time with Minor Myers. And we had a liaison person, Yvonne Jones who helped to organize it. You know, it was a smattering of minority alums and when I say that I mean African-American as well as Hispanic back then and we started to make it possible for minority alums to connect with current IWU minority students and to, you know, tether ourselves to them in a way that hadn't been done for us when we were there because back in

1971, I was part of the largest minority freshman class at Wesleyan, because they came from Harland High School in Chicago-

Jennings: Oh, wow!

Burt-Frazier: -about 30 of us or 27 to be exact, I think, and out of that our salutatorian and valedictorian came, and so we were... we were large. But, you know, school's population was 1500 at that time so altogether we had about 96... 98 minority students. That was a lot then and I guess it is a lot now too because I don't think they have that many minority students at Wesleyan now and the enrollment is about 1800 or something now so - or close to 20, yeah so... but the Minority Alumni Network allowed us to have... yeah, we had the first picnic, which is now always the first Sunday in August. First one was held at my home. I live in Dalton, Illinois - suburb - south suburb outside of Chicago and that was 25 years ago and it started there, it began there and then we had various programs where Professor Seigrain who would have a class, bustle up his class, come to Chicago and we had these forums at Cook County hospital and we talked about all kinds of social issues pertaining to Chicago - not just Chicago but, you know, the United States as a whole and the sociology of it. We also, every year, would have a Martin Luther King celebration - Dr. Reverend - Dr. Martin Luther King celebration on his birthday and we had that in Chicago - a dinner, a program, a speaker, and we just, you know, we socialize and all the students would come from campus by... the... the Office of Student Relations at that time, Ben Rhodes, I remember. But he made sure that the students who want to be involved, you know, those minority students on campus who want to come to Chicago, they always made a way for them to come. A man... helped to recruit some, you know, minority students to come to Wesleyan, because you know, my... the reason I love Wesleyan so much is because it does provide an opportunity for a quality education. You don't have to go very far, I mean, a hundred and thirty-three miles south of Chicago but it... to me, is the epitome of quality education in a hometown... feel, to the campus and the city going to Normal, and... I've always promoted it that way and so I've had the pleasure of sending a couple students to Wesleyan and that... it keeps me humble ... [Jennings giggles] ... but also it keeps me, you know, actively involved. I'm now currently an Executive Board member of the Alumni Association and so we have two meetings yearly. One is in May. One right around homecoming and you know, collectively, it's a body that also... seeks to enhance the relationship between alums, not just alums but with the current students as well and I'm happy to do so. I'm also a charter member of IWU's Council for Women. There is another monumental outreach to female students... in this country, in this world, you know, female students aren't always valued and they are not always shown their value, their true worth. And not just Wesleyan doesn't do it .but we just like to encourage, you know, our female students and also the athletes and the female employees at Wesleyan to you know, to interact with us... female alums. And so we have what we call a Senate every year and explain and that we'll deal with all different types of issues that would be pertinent for, you know, students who are seeking to get out of here and see the world and to, you know, actively use their degrees and so we have really good time every year throughout the year with our staff

have changed very effectively that the IWU Women's Council put on. Last year and earlier this year we had Chopped Talks, which are like She Speaks type of events where the speakers have six minutes and I think 20 images they can use in their talks. And we got such a great variety of subjects and speakers – all female who really put on a great She Speaks program for these past two years, this year and last year, so... I don't know. I could go on and on ...[both giggle]...

Jennings: Oh, this is – this is great! I'm enjoying it. So-

Burt-Frazier: Yeah and I think when I asked you a question earlier – that is what keeps me connected, you know, staying involved, being actively involved, and ... and coming home every year and I – I had the beauty and the opportunity of that in... 2005 ...2007. Dr. Minor Myers was a President to receive the ... the Loyalty Award at homecoming and I was just so thrilled because, you know, homecoming is when all of your – all of your students, friends and, you know, instructors – we all live together and celebrate Titans being Titans and that was such an honor to receive that Loyalty Award, and on behalf of my fellow alums, it was – it was 2002, to be exact and so, I don't know...2005 was the year my mom passed -

Jennings: Oh...

Burt-Frazier: - I kind of – my life should be organized through my own events such as that, you know and so I – I remember that she was very proud – she was very proud when I – you know, that I received the award, she couldn't travel to... to Bloomington but, you know, I often think of that because the leadership skills that have been nurtured... in me... that should come out because I attended Catholic school for majority of my early education except for two years in high school, but I also attended – back then they called it Red Cross Leadership Camp so every summer for a week we would go to this camp and that's what we'd focus on –leadership skills, communication skills, and make – becoming leaders. And I don't know if they do that nowadays. I know they have, you know, different summer programs and... and... National Honor society in which I was a part of, but I don't think they do as much as they used to do back in when I was coming up. But I could be wrong.

Jennings: Yeah. I think, university tries to promote leadership but I think definitely with alums like you who were a part of such groundbreaking... the start of such groundbreaking traditions for minority students and female students... like your participation and dedication to university really helps – helps students to realize these are the sorts of things they need to do. They need to be better leaders and staying involved and stuff like that, which is... which is great.

Burt-Frazier: Absolutely! And I'm so grateful that even though when I was at Wesleyan, we didn't have these same things, you know, we didn't have a Council for Women, we didn't have Minority Alumni Network but even that, in bet- because we didn't have there was still comradery between the students- we had Black Student Union. They have Black Student Union now as – just at the time we were in, you know, the early 70s what the Black Student Union looks like, you know, that was it. If we developed – I was the chairperson, I was the Cultural

Director for the Black Student Union and you know, even that involvement back then was essential because, you know, there wasn't that many of us. The other and that – that adage about people sticking together is true. Here you are at the college experience and that itself is you know, a really – a daunting task. But there should be one of the small minority population at a... a very, you know, good quality institution. You only have each other, you know, and I'm not sure if people realize that. Well, they did back then, but I don't know if they realize it now. So the fact that we can be these ancillary things and have these all relationships to help and augment the student experience is really key.

Jennings: Yeah, that's... that's great. That's a really important point. I think back then, especially when a lot of... a lot of laws were still changing and a lot of things were obvious and... issues like racism and segregation were still at the front of everyone's minds, except groups separating themselves – none of us are separating themselves but you know what I mean – was more understood. [Overlapping/ hard to decipher] versus today it can be seen as just so -

Burt-Frazier: -Yeah, black cultural week was – we put on party, we had fashion shows, we had like several student dinners and we could do that even now but back then, you know, that was ours... it was ours, you know, we owned it and so like okay, we had a black cultural week and it's always – it's in spring and it's like, you know, a big... a big thing, and we would organize it together and we had a Professor Bushnara who was our faculty person and he was our faculty person for the longest and he was, you know, a brother from another mother... [Jennings giggles]... he used to march with Dr. Martin Luther King. He was, you know-

Jennings: -Wow!

Burt-Frazier: -he was like a brother and he was a family beyond faculty representative so it worked out perfectly. We did.

Jennings: Wow, that's great. I think that now you see a few cases where students don't understand why they are still in need for these sorts of cultural groups but with – with a lot of things in society now like what's happening with politics and stuff, people, I think, are realizing that this is still an important thing... and representation is very important and especially I... I kind of identify with coming from Chicago as well and I went to Morgan Park for two years, a little bit close to heart-

Burt-Frazier: Okay!

Jennings: -yeah, so -

Burt-Frazier: -I know where that is.

Jennings: - yeah, so if you could tell me a bit about the culture shock coming back in '71. I'm pretty sure I have to relate to you about some things coming in 2013.

Burt-Frazier: [giggles]... Well, the one thing that I remember most vividly is that I stayed for all four years at Wesleyan at Pfeiffer hall. Back then, I came to the campus sight unseen. The only thing I knew about Wesleyan was what I learned from my camp counsellor. Her name was Kathie Dancey and I went to Methodist youth camp every summer and she was our counselor and she spoke so highly. She was a sophomore at Wesleyan. She spoke so highly of Illinois Wesleyan that I only applied to two colleges: I applied to Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa because I had a friend that attended there... and Illinois Wesleyan. Everybody else from my high school had gone on a tour with Silas Pernell. Pernell was a community leader in Chicago who was a friend of Wesleyan and he was saying that Wesleyan is the best place for African-American students and if you want to go there, if you, you know, have to work on, you know, your ACT – back then it was SAT – you scored well and you were a good student, that was the place for you. And Wesleyan would, and still does, find a way for you to go there.

Jennings: Mm-hmm.

Burt-Frazier: It's not all about money. It's like, do you want to go there and you have the credentials, the chance, that was our word for you to go. And I love it for – for true, because it happened to me and my son who attended Wesleyan. So about a year and a half and then he moved and came back and graduated from Roosevelt-

Jennings: -Okay-

Burt-Frazier: -but the beauty was, back then, you would come to Wesleyan... not that many, you know, African-Americans, not that many minority students. Who mostly were there, majority of them did come from Chicago or Illinois. But then there were so many others, you know, some from Florida, some from Detroit, some from St. Louis... and so when I stepped out from in front of Pfeiffer that day in August. So this Barbara was the RA and... one of the RAs in Pfeiffer... and she, you know, she was President of the Minority Alumni Network for many years and she was just so bubbly and so enthusiastic... and "Oh, come on in. Welcome to IWU!" [Jennings giggles] And when she left, I think I must have channeled her enthusiasm because I never left Pfeiffer. I was there for all four years and in my last three, I was an RA.

Jennings: Okay.

Burt-Frazier: And so I think she made such an impression on me that, you know, after that... I was like a changed person. [Jennings laughs] I know I was already enthusiastic but I was never what you might call a wallflower. I was always personable but I became a cheerleader for Wesleyan and still – still am. [Jennings laughs] All because of my experience. I mean you know, I might just say that every experience of minority students is going to be like mine because I know that there are some stories that are not – I can always talk about my own and what I know of others, and for the most part, it was always good. It was a place of opportunity. You could do things there, you could... you know, stretch...your... yourself and do things... different things

and lots of things that maybe you hadn't been exposed to before. I remember my freshman year, the gym requirement, you know, the fitness requirement -

Jennings: Yeah.

Burt-Frazier: -you take something, and I took fencing and I loved it, you know ...[Jennings laughs]... and ended up learning the- the – this – one of the fencing coach that we had, you know, at culmination after the play and then I took Tennis. I played tennis when I came to Wesleyan but I had – I took tennis again there and won doubles-

Jennings: -Wow!

Burt-Frazier: -for the college and I did liturgical dance at the chapel, you know, we stayed at chapel and we were in a cage... [giggles]... But we weren't required to go. I came at a time when they had just ended the requirement that you had to attend. But you could go to one but they always had it on Wednesday but I was in liturgical dance – that was my first exposure to that. And I got the experience there. I wasn't a drama major, but I knew drama majors who, as part of the senior project, they had to put on productions and I was, you know, act in that. Now, currently, I act at the community college in theatre red because if they need someone to be loud...[Jennings giggles]... and I'll be the one. I hear so many things while I was matriculating... at Wesleyan that shouldn't I be the person I am today? And I am so grateful and I would like to share not just my experience but my – the – the enthusiasm that I had when I, you know, I come back home, I always encourage people to come back home. Come back to Wesleyan. I love people who I trusted to come in back – they haven't been back since they graduated-

Jennings: -oh, wow-

Burt-Frazier: -but-

Jennings: -well, there's so many changes. It's worth coming back.

Burt-Frazier: Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely so that ... like I said, I... my experience was great. I had ... it was worse at the beginning. I had three jobs – I used to do the catering service, and I was a Desk Aide at Pfeiffer and then I had a job off-campus which was – I can't remember name of the bank but it was a community bank that was a bike ride away and I had a bike, I didn't have a car or anything... and I would ride my bike down – I guess it was East Omega St, and from there and my mom, at the time Dean Jensen was the Dean of Students and I remember my mom calling him and complains that “why does my daughter have to ride a bike downtown” or “Can't you find a job on-campus?” ...[both laugh]... and so it ended up but I did have that job for a little while but I did have that job doing the catering service job and the desk aide, I made ends meet and so then as I said, my sophomore, junior and senior year, I became an RA and that was the best job on campus. And then my junior year – late junior year or senior year I became Argus

editor and that pay – I didn't even know Argus editor paid ...[overlapping]... as a job. I was just trying to be a journalist. And then I find out that yeah ... you get , you know, some kind of stipend or something, go over to the office pick up your check kind of thing and I'm like wow, great, I could be a newsy and I get paid...[Jennings laughs]...

Jennings: Yeah, that's so great. I think Wesleyan has always just been a place where you can get involved in as much as you want to and -

Burt-Frazier: -absolutely, it sure is.

Jennings: -experience as much as you allow yourself to.

Burt-Frazier: The only thing I didn't do that I'd love to do and I do now is travel and there was no opportunity. I know people who had never been out of their city...

Jennings: Wow!

Burt-Frazier: ...where they lived, but they came to Wesleyan and they traveled to Europe. They went to – you know, Mexico and they went here or they went there. They are all... under the office of ... of learning. Having a class, I knew students who went to New Orleans and they had part of the history class, or part of the, you know, a French class, or something, and that's... you know, that's an opportunity 'cause people back then didn't travel. Now I love travelling and I have the means to do it but back then, you know, students didn't have that. How are you going to pay the tuition and then go off to Germany or something. And all that traveling you did, you did there. So... and again, I mean I rushed into that kind of thing had after that, but if you're at Wesleyan you are there and you could wear yourself all kinds of stuffs. Wonderful! Wonderful experience.

Jennings: Yeah, I'd say, I say they really – they really push that to this day. I was an international business major and it's part of my requirement to study abroad but if you go into the study abroad office, there's someone there just asking "Where do you wanna go?," "Where do you see yourself"

Burt-Frazier: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Jennings: -really pushing students to just get out there and experience as much as possible. I'd say that's a very important character trait of this university.

Burt-Frazier: Yeah. And you know it broadens your experience. It does so much for you, for a person period, to go somewhere where they had never been where there are people who are unlike them, whose lives are so different from theirs and you get to learn so much about the nature and just the human condition as it is. You learn how much advantage you have that other people don't have, things that you may often take for granted – other people don't even have it and here you have and you don't recognize it you know...[Jennings giggles]... It does something

to a person. It makes you, you know, what they say it makes you worldly, it makes you well-traveled. It does something to a person in their development that some people just never get. And, you know, you only go around once. You're not getting younger and so this is it. And so you just have to avail yourself of all the barriers as much as you can from this moment, and here is it- to enhance not just the quality of your life and those loved ones around you but other people too. I read in the magazine the other day about a Wesleyan alum. Her name is Charlene Carruthers and this young woman, this student once she'd been to Washington she was like, you know, you know lobbying and advocating for social justice and you know, that's something that developed at Wesleyan. How did she – I mean she probably was like when she got there but it was something that was nurtured and developed and enhanced so much so that when she left, you know, she hit the ground running and she has been, you know, helping others to understand. And making a wonderful name for herself in the process. I was, you know, I did think it was a wonderful thing. But it's still there, you know, helping to put out, you know, quality scholars. That's the other thing I – I would mention about Wesleyan that then we weren't all bookworms because we had athletes. I know several of them, Steven Douglas, he played football, John Flowers you know all these athletes that came to Wesleyan they were still athletes, but they were athlete scholars. A scholar athlete because there was no such thing as an athletic scholarship, you know, Wesleyan doesn't give backups but they were sure giving out plenty of academic scholarships itself and assessments for your learning and at the same time you're playing sports that you love too, you know, you can't beat that.

Jennings: Right... right. Right.

Burt-Frazier: Yeah. And they had such wonderful resources you know, we – back behind there we had swimming in the- what was the Memorial Union which is now Hansen. So they had swimming pool there. Well, heck. after when we left, there was like the natatorium they got this huge swimming thing and then they got the field house over there that they built, that is like, you know, a work of art with a shack inside and the fitness rooms and all that so it's not like they are only committed to athletes, I mean, to academics, they're committed to a well-rounded student, you know, one that, you know is good, mentally and physically so you got to love it really...[laughs]

Jennings: Yeah. That's a – that's great insight. So you said, you said so many inspirational things about being well-rounded and study abroad and I guess, do you have any other advice just for today's students at Wesleyan or the class of – that'll be coming in this Fall of 2017 and what they should be getting involved in and ...

Burt-Frazier: Well, I recommend to any new student at Wesleyan to open themselves up, you know, allow themselves to experience all that Wesleyan is and I guarantee that they'd do that. They will find something at Wesleyan that they will love. Maybe a few things and I know that IWU is small, but they have to open themselves up no matter where you're heading from, no matter what school, city, whatever scenario, familial environment, you know, may have put upon

on you, whatever you work for doesn't matter – open yourself up and allow yourself to experience Wesleyan and everything that it provides and I guarantee you'll find something that will stick with you. And, you know, hopefully it will be like me and that something will forever tether you to Wesleyan and make you so adamant about it that you just want everybody else to have that same experience, the same opportunities that you do. And so that's what will make you, you know, the cheerleader that I am ...[both laugh]...which you really don't want to be. It's funny that, especially on the alumni board – these are alums the all different years that we had some - so many classes, 50-something and then the classes from the 60s, all the way up, you know, class of '15 and everybody is so committed to you know their kind of way of life and knowing that you will get a quality education there and so much more. I chose not do any greek, you know, we had a minority – we had a ... two minority sorority fraternities on campus and but they did that and the socials at Illinois State which is right down the street, you know.

Jennings: Mm-hmm.

Burt-Frazier: But that's not for everybody either. Some people, I have three children, two girls and my older son – he wanted to go to a historically black college, that was his thing that he wanted to do, and when we were there he became a Chaplain. That's something else he wanted to do.

Jennings: Mm-hmm.

Burt-Frazier: And so you know it's different for some people. Some people need that, some people want that, other people don't and so nobody is, you know, pressuring you to do anything but yeah, the cheerleaders are there and you can avail yourself and find something that could see you. And, there you go. You're done...

Jennings: Well, thank you so much for speaking with me. I really appreciated it. This has been very insightful for me just to kind of remember why I love Wesleyan myself and why I came here.

Burt-Frazier: See... that's great, Yemaya. I am so thankful that you wanted me and you encouraged me to tell you my... a little about my story. Are you on the other council... Minority Alumni Picnic, in August?

Jennings: Yes, I'll still be on campus. So yes I will.

Burt-Frazier: Okay, well I will see you because I kind of make it my business to never miss one like I say, this very first one was at my home and but I live there and I didn't come and, well, yeah it's surely a good time – it's only a couple of hours, it's not all day but you get college students, you get alums, you get to know faculty at IWU, alumni relations and stuff and get parents. That's always a good thing because the parents want to see where their kids are going and, you know, what's the...you know...what the climate is like and what the people are like and

it's a really good time. Everybody ... they always have you know the cookout food ... [both giggle]... burgers and, you know, brats and stuff, so it's good.

Jennings: Well, great. I look forward to meeting you then.

Burt-Frazier: Yes, and I hope you have a great rest of the summer and that your project keeps going famously and thank you so much.

Jennings: Thank you. You have a great summer too.

Burt-Frazier: You're welcome. Thank you. Goodbye.