Phyllis Lee Oral History Interview, January 28, 2015

Title
"Striving for Equal Opportunity at OSU"

Date
January 28, 2015

Location
Valley Library, Oregon State University.

Summary
In the interview, Lee discusses her upbringing and education in Portland, and the importance that Chinese culture played during her youth. She then notes her school years at the Oregon College of Education, her first employment as an elementary school teacher, and her travels overseas with her husband, who was enlisted in the military. From there she recalls her tenure working for the College of Education at Portland State University, her years of involvement with a regional Civil Rights compliance program, the completion of her doctorate in Education at Oregon State University, and her employment as Director of Employee Education at Kaiser Permanente.

The bulk of the session focuses on Lee's professional associations with OSU as a member of its Board of Visitors and as Director of the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA). She recounts her hiring as director of the newly created office, the lack of diversity and the racial tensions that led to the office's creation, and her collaborations with OSU Presidents and upper administration to improve the climate on campus. She shares her memories of the early days of the OMA and the role that it played in enhancing diversity and helping shape curriculum at OSU. She likewise remarks on the creation and impact of OSU's cultural centers, the reaction on campus and in the community to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, her office's outreach to the OSU Greek system, and her connection to the university's Ethnic Studies department.

As the interview nears its close, Lee speaks to the impact made upon her by an important mentor, Dick Withycombe. She also describes the efforts of OSU's TEAM (Together Everyone Achieves More) initiative and details her work with numerous professional organizations in her field. The interview concludes with a discussion of Lee's activities in retirement, the creation of the Phyllis S. Lee Award, Lee's reflections on change at OSU and her thoughts on the direction of the university going forward.

Interviewee
Phyllis Lee

Interviewer
Janice Dilg

Website
http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh150/lee/

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Transcript

Janice Dilg: Today is January 28th, 2015. My name is Janice Dilg, I'm the oral historian for the OSU Sesquicentennial Oral History Project and today I'm here with Dr. Phyllis Lee, we're in the Wilson Room of the Valley Library and we'll be doing her oral history today. Good morning and welcome.

Phyllis Lee: Good morning Jan, thank you for inviting me to talk with you.

JD: Glad that you're willing to do that. We will get to your time at OSU but I think some background of your early life and a bit of family history to sort of set your background would be a good place to begin.

PL: Okay. I was—I'm a native Oregonian, which I find there are fewer and fewer of us. I was born in Portland's Chinatown back in the day when it was a Chinatown. My dad had a small grocery store and we lived above it and most of us in the family were born there. From a family of ten kids I'm number eight and spent most of my early years in Chinatown and then we, at the beginning of World War II, we moved to a home in southwest Portland. At that time there were many areas in the city in which people who were not Caucasian could buy a home. And we, I think, landed in a very special community which was a community of immigrants just like my parents. These immigrants were from Italy, Italian Catholics, and from Germany and Russia, German and Irish Jews, all first generation. So, my classmates were like me, our parents didn't speak English or a limited English and yet they all got along fine. I had an Italian grandpa on one side and a Jewish grandma on the other side. So, we grew up hearing polyglot languages and learning customs like they were everyday things. And it was, it's only as an adult that I'll look back and thought—was able to appreciate that experience. It just seemed like it was the thing to do but I think that started my interest in people not like myself. Because as a Chinese community, we were pretty close and closed, even within our family and community events. It was probably mutual exclusion, if you will. Not feeling welcome in the larger society and the larger society not welcoming people who didn't look like the majority.

So, that was kind of the grounds, you might say, that I slowly emerged as somebody really interested in different cultures, different languages and how people lived, because as kids we visited each other's homes and I knew Jewish terms and languages and holidays and I knew all about catechism and, interestingly enough, my father sent us to Chinese school, the Jewish family kids had to go to Hebrew school and the Catholic kids had to go to the catechism. So, we all felt equally limited.

JD: So, did you attend Shattuck School?

PL: Failing.

JD: Failing, okay.

PL: It was at that time. Josiah P. Failing. And among our contemporaries outside the community it was kind of a, you know, "haha, you're attending failing school," none of us realizing he was early—or his family—early movers and shakers of the city.

JD: Absolutely.

PL: Of course the school is no longer in existence. It's gone through several iterations of what it has become and now it's part of the Northwest College of Chiropractic Medicine.

JD: Right. So, the building's still there—

PL: It's still there.

JD: --with its tower and clock and—

PL: It's still standing.

JD: So, the—it does sound like a very rich area. This was, I think it's called Old South Portland, is sometimes how that neighborhood is referred to.

PL: Yes. It was Lair Hill at that time. Now it's Lair Hill, Terwilliger. Actually, we're at the, almost at the foot of the tram.

JD: Oh sure, sure.

PL: That area.

JD: So, what were your interests, whether outside of school or favorite subjects in school as you were growing up?

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PL: I think I just generally liked school because it was a different experience. We all called it American School, versus Chinese school, and it was such a different experience in a different way of interacting with others. But that, it was like living two lives, it's really—because when we left home in the morning we could become the American kids. We came home at night, we were the Chinese kid. Probably my most difficult subject was math, more out of not feeling like I could keep up with brothers and sisters who were much better than I and expectations that teachers have that the elders did so well, where are you? And you haven't gone through life being stereotyped of expectations, and it started very, very young, you know, you were disciplined, you were obedient, you never sassed, never fought, never raised your voice and it was always being compliant, acquiescent. And that, that works well in American schools, still does, you know. There's still that expectation, although I was a—Chinese kids and Asian kids in general have changed. I'd say 360, not 180.

JD: And did you have any particular hobbies or interests that really shaped kind of your time away from school?

PL: It just seemed that we had really full days with going to American school and then right afterwards walking the distance to Chinatown to attend two, two and a half hours of Chinese school and also half days on Saturdays. And then whatever home duties and chores took up all the other time. It—my parents, immigrants, very—from very, very poor, very, in background, in China, probably never had the word "relaxation," "rest" or "leisure" in their vocabulary, in English or Chinese. Mom was a stay at home mom, she didn't speak English that well, although I think she understood us quite well from just being around us, but never spoke it. Dad, enough to do business. At home we always spoke Chinese and we were a Chinese family. So, in terms of what American society would describe as hobbies and things that you do for fun, they just weren't there. We just thought that's the way life was supposed to be. We didn't roller skate, we had no bikes; in a family of ten kids, money was very tight. And my parents were still, still had family in China and during World War, during that time it was sending money back to the village, whatever there was to spare, because the war in China started way before the Americans entered.

So, that was kind of that existence which now, looking back, we'd say hmm. It was interesting but it was not particularly broadening in that sense. Although, when you look at it, having that multicultural and bicultural existence was in itself a very broadening experience.

JD: And was somewhat common for that time period because there was a large first generation immigrant population in the United States.

PL: Yes. And I think as Chinese families moved out of Chinatown and became upwardly mobile, generally through the efforts of the older children of the first generation; they got jobs, they brought money home, and family started dispersing from Chinatown then. Community-wide experiences broadened a little bit but our family was still pretty much encapsulated, I would use that word.

JD: And then you went off to Lincoln High School After elementary, which was K trough 8 at that point. And that was a new experience, new cultural experience.

PL: It was a new cultural, extraordinary experience because Lincoln, at that time, was a school where the movers and shakers of the wealth of Portland sent their children because they all lived in the west side at that time; West Hills and Portland Heights, Arlington Heights. So, for someone who came from my background and these were kids from my community too and similar communities like the kids who lived in the Shattuck area. We were really, I think, probably a

strange group of people, had no understanding of the social life of these kids we were going to school with, the clubs, the clothing, the athletic—the sports that they would do. Skiing was a big thing.

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And it was a very confusing time because it was, well it was adolescence: "who are—who am I, what am I?" And it was not, they were not the kinds of resources that were present or that awareness of multi-levels of high school life and how to help everyone have a good experience. So yeah, that was probably, I would say, some of my most stressful times. But yet it was in high school that I got the experience that actually opened a lot of doors for me, outside of the institution.

JD: And what were some of those experiences?

PL: Well, the primary one was Junior Achievement. I was fortunate enough to be placed in the bank that served other Junior Achievement companies and our sponsor was back in California and then it was, the following year, it was First National Bank. And that experience of working with kids from all over the city of Portland, but also with professionals, creative—and they were all businessmen at that time, had an interest in working with high school age kids. And I didn't feel the class distinction among us in Junior Achievement that I felt in high school. They were just interested that we learned how to be good bankers and the ethics of banking and good customer relations. And it was through my acquaintance with our mentors that I got a summer job that enabled me to go to college.

And also the encouragement that my life didn't end in high school, that I would off and be the traditional secretary, wife, mother, that kind of outlook that many of my contemporaries had, especially in the Chinese community. And they gave me that, they encouraged it. Also, in a way defied family tradition, because girls in Chinese families are not your educated ones; if they had a choice they would always be boys. You raise a girl and you send her out to be married to someone else. And she joins that other family; she's no longer bringing things, bringing resources home to you, they would go to another family. So, it was the boys, that was, and that's the way we thought, that's the way life was. But, without the experience and the encouragement Junior Achievement, I would never have known that there was another world available. So, that was the main thing that I would say was the door opener.

JD: And so you took that encouragement and headed off to Western Oregon University, although at that time it was the Oregon Normal School.

PL: Oh, it had gone past Normal.

JD: Oh, okay.

PL: Oregon College of Education.

JD: Okay.

PL: But, it—the teacher school, the teacher college. And I went there because I got a scholarship from the Oregon PTA and I had the misfortune of having a college—a high school counselor, had her for four years, who discouraged me from going to college. And then when I just went ahead and applied for scholarships thanks to the help of my Junior Achievement mentors, told me that I would never probably be able to be a teacher because my kind of people were not hired to be teachers. And that was kind of like my first real rude awakening of how limited my life could be for being Chinese and being female. So, that was another high school learning.

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So, it was almost out of defiance, although I wouldn't have called it at that time, that I went ahead and applied for scholarships, more than the PTA, but the one that was the one that appealed to me the most and the one that I could afford, knowing there would be no resources available through the family, was the one that took me to Oregon College of Education. Which was, you know, if somebody was looking out for me, that was the best deal. Not just because it was—the financial but because of the experiences I had there and the people I met and the opportunities to broaden my horizons even further. I met my first farm kid, you know. This is a kid raised inside the city of Portland and traffic and never saw a real live cow before kind of a thing, so you know, I had people in the dormitories and friends and they'd said "come on

home with us for a weekend." And they were my first experiences in being in an American home, were when I was—no, I take that back. My Jewish and Italian friends, we kind of went to each other's homes but our homes were so much alike except for the language, you know, or some rituals. But, so to go to what I call an American home with someone who was neither Jewish nor Catholic, was an experience. And that was really another eye-opening, broadening experience. So it, you know, it's like layers, you just keep adding to it.

JD: And what degree did you earn there?

PL: I got a bachelors in science and education and then trekked off to Coos Bay, Oregon for my first job.

JD: And what was that?

PL: I taught fifth grade at Blossom Gulch School. There really was a Mr. Blossom. The land that the school was situated on was actually a gulch. It was reclaimed land from the bay. And that was great, I mean the people, we were just so well accepted, although within the town of Coos Bay there was a family that, who was a dentist who was Chinese and then the cook in the ubiquitous Chinese café in every town and hamlet in this country, was Chinese, and married to a Caucasian. So—and then me. But it was a great experience because there were so few of us and we were part of, we were professional, it was just being a part of the community, there was just no question, I didn't have to look for where do I fit in. It was just part of it.

JD: And did you have any thought back to that earlier high school counselor when you got hired to teach right out of college, that perhaps you were going to have broader horizons than that person was leading you to believe?

PL: I wondered what she would say now that I had graduated and was—had teaching contact in hand, fully employed and kids who liked me being their teacher. I just often wonder what she would have—and would she have changed her mind about the kids she counseled? That's the part that eventually became my nagging thought, was she must have come across some successes that would have informed how she counseled.

JD: And so you taught for a couple of years in a couple of different locations, including the Department of Defense.

PL: Yes.

JD: What drew you there?

PL: Well, I was married to an officer in the Air Force. My husband's a dentist and when he graduated from dental school he was obligated to serve some military time. And it was just very fortunate that we were sent to Tachikawa Japan and I wanted to continue teaching because I wasn't sure what else I would do, so I wasn't sure what an officer's wife did or was supposed to do, I mean we were just kids from Portland. And he grew up in a Chinese community almost just as encapsulated as my experience, and what were we doing in Japan? And being in a country that had—historically were enemies with our heritage, what were we doing there? So, I thought, so you go back to what you're really comfortable with. I went back to teaching and they were eager to have me teach because they needed substitutes, for one thing. But in order to teach, you had to become an employee of the department. You had to go through all the finger printing and background checking, the whole thing, regardless of the fact that I was married to a military guy. It was just like I was a separate employee.

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And that was a great experience because that exposed me to such a variety of children and their families, both military and civilian because there were a lot of employees who were not military but worked in, for example, the post exchange and did jobs that did not require military expertise or knowledge. So, that was another exposure. And learning about another kind of social system, rankings, military rankings, you know. The officers and the non-coms and then everybody else kind of and just seeing that kind of interaction both among the children and their parents. So, you know, I had a young kid who told me "well, I'm going to report you to my dad, he's a colonel; your husband's only a captain." I didn't know any better, I said "okay." So, you know, it was learning about, and so you, it captured what kids learn, you know, their place in life is. But you know, we still got along.

JD: And so then you start to transition out of teaching. Talk about the motivations and, perhaps just a bit generally, sort of what you went into and what you were drawn to.

PL: When our family returned from Japan, my Coos Bay Principal Superintendent was interested in knowing if I would —wait a minute, let me back up a little bit. When we returned from Japan, I returned to my old, my former district, Lake Oswego, and taught there. But my original Principal Superintendent needed a substitute teacher in his current district because a person had medical problems. So, I taught there for about six months and, interesting enough, it was the—it is—the most affluent district in Oregon. And so that was another kind of learning experience. Where do you fit in as a teacher within this district where parents genuinely felt they ran the school district, or they ran the school? For example, there was no such thing as a teacher's room, it was a parent-teacher's room, so you could walk in at any time and there'd be a couple parents in there, like they belonged. Parents played—came to school and talked a lot with teachers and gave their expectations of their kids.

That six months was sufficient and so the following fall my former school district, Lake Oswego, said "we have a position open, are you interested?" and I went back there. But that was good to have that experience in the affluent district, because these are the movers and shakers of Portland. You need to know all the different elements that create a community or an environment. So, when I was in Lake Oswego, then I was encouraged to do some classroom counseling. There were very few counselors in school for that time. And that really interested me, working with children to help them succeed. And the one counselor in the district encouraged me to go back to school, so I did. I went back to Portland State and got my masters in counseling there.

And then again, it was another layer of experience and I was invited to, by PSU's College of Education, to be their adviser for teacher education students and to work with post-baccalaureate students who were, had a degree in something else but wanted to go into teaching. So, I did that and I taught classes at PSU in teacher education and then counseling education. And then my husband said "you want to be a classroom teacher your entire life?" And it was through his foresight, he said "you know, you have a chance to be as well-prepared as you could possibly be for whatever happens in the future. I think you should go back and get your doctorate." You know, it went boom, here's this traditional Chinese man, you know, just —and he, that wasn't in his experience but from whatever exposure he had and also because he had seen so many military families that were kind of locked—especially young families, locked, you know. They married young, they had children young and then they were locked and then there was just no room for books. So, by that time we had a daughter so I came to Oregon State to work on my doctorate. He built me a desk and my brother was living here, I rented one of his bedrooms and he sent me off to school. He stayed in Portland with our daughter and then I returned to my position at Portland State.

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I was asked to—invited to join a federally funded project that worked with school districts out of compliance with Civil Rights Act, that were not providing appropriate education or employment in their communities. So, I did that for the next eight years and traveled throughout Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Alaska. It was interesting because people saw us as kind of the "oh, you're from the government, what are you doing here?" Well yes, we're from the government, it's not going to cost you a penny but we're going to help you make the changes that are necessary for you to continue receiving your funding, but even more importantly, your kids are successful in school and your employees are those with training and education and interests and the life experiences that can help the kids make that achievement, you know. It's hard for anybody to say they don't want that, although they, maybe they behaved—one of my first, our very first school district we were asked to move in groups, we were a very multicultural group, that if we moved around town we needed to be more than two of us and to not be upset if we saw firearms. So that was another learning experience, wasn't it?

JD: Well, it's, I guess that doesn't surprise me to some extent because there certainly was a lot of pushback to Civil Rights from the faction, once it had become law or prior to that, and there do need to be those cultural shifts in addition to the political and legal requirements.

PL: I had a fortunate experience in that our team, which numbered about thirty but they were not a full time thirty, we moved in and out as needs rose, we were a team that could replicate any school district because every one of us had had some kind of experience. I was in teaching and counseling, we had a woman who had been a school secretary for eons, we had a financial guy who could help with budgets, we had a former superintendent, we had former principals, so it was not like a group of outlanders not knowing what education was about. What set us apart was we were not from there,

and that's an important thing to realize when you go in thinking you're going to provide some service or some assistance. You've got to remember you're not from there. So, what are you going to do now to reduce that level of tension and anxiety? And that was our learning. Every day we debriefed that day, what went right, what went wrong, what could we do better, who had—who had come onboard, who can we bring along. That was probably the best educational and professional experience I've ever had until I came here to Oregon State.

JD: So, that's perhaps the perfect transition point for—or am I jumping too far ahead?

PL: Oh no, no. If something comes up, you know, I'll...

JD: Okay. So, you had been doing a variety of work in the field, certainly around issues of affirmative action and civil rights for quite a number of years by that point. How did you end up reconnecting with Oregon State University?

PL: I smile because first of all, I had a wonderful doctoral committee and they tolerated me. Took me ten years to get my degree. Started here and then I went back to Portland, Portland State, and then I got that great position with them, that formally was the Race Desegregation Assistance Center and the Sex Desegregation Assistance Center, because we also worked with Title IX issues. And my step person on the committee gently nudged me and said "you know, you've done your research, you've got this commitment to finish"—well finally the university said "you come back or you're going to start over."

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And it was very serendipitous because by that time I had returned to teaching at Portland State and frankly it was a bit dull in comparison to that work I had done before. I was working with people who were not particularly wanting to be there; they were people who needed to be there for recertification purposes. I was teaching mostly graduate classes. My joy was teaching students who were wanting to be teachers, the very initial classes. Teaching teachers and teaching school administrators are in itself an interesting but yet also rewarding challenge. They were so different from these young bright-eyed, bushy-tailed men and women who wanted to be teachers.

So, I came back here and finished because, as I say, serendipitous. I was a little bored and feeling I shouldn't have wasted all that money, you know, my husband building me the desk, you know. And also it would be a big letdown for my—for facing my community, because I did have a lot of community interest and support—by community I mean the Chinese community—because I was among the first, if not the first or second, to get a doctorate, other than a professional medical or dental or optometric degree. So, I said okay, I got to do this, and then one of the women I worked with said "the person you need to do it for is for your daughter, because you don't feel you need it anymore to do what you want to do, but you need to do it for your daughter and her generation." So, that is what really—and she said "write your dissertation as if it was a letter to her," because I was having a hard time pulling all this stuff together. And that's what I did.

So, I came back here for a year, finished it, went back to Portland State and found it even more dull and went to Kaiser Permanente. They had a position for training and development and I thought time to put the money where the mouth is. You are teaching these classes ostensibly to help people provide a service because, especially in our counseling classes, I had mental health workers, I had addiction counselors, had parole and probation, so I had a variety of people who needed to have counseling skills to do their job. Put up or shut up time. So, I went to Kaiser for five and a half years and served as their director of employee education training and development, another wonderful layer of experience of working in an arena outside of education, yet in education related topics. Lived through a nursing strike at Kaiser, helped develop a performance rating tool that actually worked, did a lot of career counseling, developed a supervisory training program for staff at—administrative staff and nursing staff who wanted to move forward in their professional career so they could become team leaders or nurse managers. And it was taught like a regular class. You get credit from PCC and we met every week. They had homework and they had to have a mentor. It was exciting. And then I got to travel to other regions where there were Kaiser Permanente—I don't want to call "organizations" because, well they were all part of the Kaiser Permanente family but they were discreet regions. So, I went back east to the mid—Washington D.C.—and as far west as Hawaii and worked in Southern California, worked with the central office in training physician and nurse managers to run clinics. So you know, what more could one ask for in enjoying a position?

JD: Well, and it sounds like there was, within that position, you were sort of constantly innovating and moving slightly in different directions.

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PL: Yes, and at the same time working in the issues of diversity without throwing it in people's faces. But the work provided so many avenues of bringing that in and discussing it, because there were communication classes, for example. What do we mean by communication and what do we know? We were seeing an increasingly large number of Kaiser members who were not like myself kinds of experiences, you know, not white Americans, because the employment patterns were changing and interestingly we had a very diverse medical, physician staff. So there was lots of opportunities, like you know, I got to develop the first multicultural teacher education class at PSU, multicultural counseling. I got to teach—develop the first multicultural health practice class at Kaiser. And you know, those were exciting because people were with you. None of these were done in a vacuum, none of these were ever "boy, have I got a curriculum for you," you know, this is something you can't pass. But it rose out of people's recognition of what they needed to carry out their jobs or the organization's mission.

And again, a lot of challenge but a lot of reward in that sense of how people changed of their own accord. And certainly with working in the Civil Rights team that taught us that—reinforced that you can't change people but you can change the environment so that people will feel the need and want to change or leave or do something else. So, that's the learning from those experiences, is you can't fix people and you can't legislate them to change. Maybe cosmetically, because they don't want to go to jail or lose funding, but it's not lasting and it actually builds much more resentment and resistance. It just builds resistance, if not resentment. Those are lessons learned that I brought to OSU when I got this phone call out of the blue from the Provost and said "we would like to have somebody come here temporarily," because I was still at Kaiser.

JD: And who is the Provost at that time?

PL: At that time it's Graham Spanier and he was, he said "I'm calling on behalf of John Byrne." And by then I had worked with John, being a member of the Board of Visitors from Minority Affairs for Oregon State. Oregon State was the first institution in Oregon to have this community advisor group and John Byrne was the president at the time and started it. So, I had had years of interacting with John, so that was fine. He said that John wanted to start at his office and there had been a number of incidents on campus and students were really demanding some changes. So, they were—one of the agreements was to open an Office of Multicultural Affairs and was asking if I might want to. I thought "okay, temporary, maybe nine months. That's great. I like my job at Kaiser but I've got people on the staff who'd just carry on." And so that's how I got here.

JD: And this was in?

PL: 1991.

JD: 1990?

PL: 1991.

JD: '91. And when you say there were incidents on campus and students were demanding change, can you expand a little on kind of what the scene was that you were walking into?

PL: You know, Oregon State had a reputation, had built on student's and community's experience that it was the whitest —and it truly was—institution in the state, but also located in the white Willamette Valley in Oregon which was either, at that time, the second or third whitest state in the whole fifty, you know. Just behind New Hampshire and Vermont or something like that. And so, there were a lot of things that had been going on over time that were just sort of said earlier "kids will be kids" kind of things. So, "it's part of growing up" and, you know, "these kids are, that's part of the college experience." Well, then there were more outspoken kids coming on campus, you know, the evolution of community and kids were speaking up. The few minority students on campus, primarily African American students, just about had it. Because they were the brunt of most, if not all, of the ethnic. There were few Latinos and most of the Asian students kind

of went into the stereotypical sciences and were not involved in campus activities and organizations and they didn't— the rising women's movement also brought a lot of sensitivity and awareness to women students, white women students.

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So, the juxtaposition of those awarenesses and sensitivities and recognizing that we're being treating differently based on characteristics of which we have no control. We didn't choose to be women, for example, we didn't choose to be black. But the universities oblivious...obliviousness to the feelings and the academic experiences—I mean we had, there were professors who were named as shaming kids in class. These kids felt very shamed, or called them out in ways, or expecting them to speak as a representative of their entire race, kind of thing, resenting outspoken young women, you know, putting down women. Those just accumulated, you know. It's accumulative effects of all this. But they were treated, unfortunately, as isolated incidences. It just happened to you or you, you know, it's not—but I—as I understand it, in the fall of 1990 you know, it came to a head when student body officers went on their pre-school retreat and there were a series of racist and sexist skits presented. And add that to the ongoing experiences of African American kids and women, it just all came to a head. I was not on campus at that time. I understand there was a big confrontation of the students and John Byrne and John rightly enough sat by himself at a table in the MU Lounge and heard it all. And students wrote letters. They're all in the archives I believe, and responses back and forth.

But one of the agreements was to have an office on campus that addressed diversity, even though no one knew what that would look like, but the words were right, the title was right and a commission on racism that had been previously formed got—was not able to engender any responses. People were afraid to come forward to a recognized body. So, that's how the office was formed and I said "okay, if Kaiser releases me, I'll come temporarily." And so I came that fall, I believe, tidied up, and we just, seat of our pants were—but I was fortunate to have that experience; the previous experience with the teaching and having taught at PSU seemed to make brownie points with academic people, you know, that sort of thing. And the work that I'd done in school districts, you know. The kids recognized I had worked with young people, you know. I was just an—this adult figure. And then during the time I was here temporarily, a job description was built and whatever was necessary to establish the office and then at the end, when it was open, I decided to apply. And I had the good fortune to be successful.

JD: So, from your interactions with John Byrne there's certainly, I'm sure, a lot of university presidents who might listen but not necessarily know how to take the next step or perhaps have the courage to take the next step, because as you're noting, there was certainly a lot of pushback or people who didn't think there was an issue. What was your experience about what pushed him to action or, I'm not sure if pushed is the right word, but?

PL: Yeah, I got a sense that he knew something needed to be done. Something was necessary, that the kids were not just spouting off. He took them seriously. That's what John did. He took and heard, maybe for the first time by an administrator, at least in my experience, that had some clue to the speakers, that somebody was listening and taking them seriously. And John had already started the Board of Visitors for Minority Affairs and that group heard from some of the students and that group had a mission, which was to increase the number of students of color on this campus. And to increase the number of faculty and staff and to, with an end to kids—was not just recruiting but insuring that they graduated and that they graduated in an academic area in which they could generally find a job. And the same with the faculty, faculty and staff retention, promotion, tenure, the whole ball of wax, not just hiring people, could be window dressing. And then the third one was change the environment of the community, the environment of the campus would be changed so that the first two goals could actually be achievable.

[0:45:48]

So, that was from the Board of Visitors, so John was already hearing possible solutions and the fact that he had allies in the community who could and would work with him. So, I think that encouraged him. It encouraged, certainly, the twenty-four members, that the university was trying to do stuff, because it was also a lot of unhappiness of sort of a stagnation. So, I think John, what John said to me one time was "what do you think I hired you for?" I, you know, "you know what the situation is now; you do what you think is necessary and I'll be behind you." So, whatever I asked him to support, whenever I gave him information, I always felt like there was that open door, open ear, open mind.

And I would say the same thing for Roy Arnold, who at that point I came on was the Provost. And Roy as Provost, because he was so involved in operations, had a whole—was able to even strengthen and deepen and broaden the whole notion of changing campus environment, bringing on more students of color, hiring people who students could relate to and could relate to students. You know, not just subject matter specialists. So, I think that John and Paul Risser, his successor, and then Tim White who was interim after him, they all demonstrated, at least to the satisfaction to the Board of Visitors, who were very, very critical, because after all, they were representing a community here and if they screwed up, their community would hear about it.

I think they felt that all three of them were open to hearing and listening and then acting on recommendations and suggestions. And you know, if you were asking me for characteristics and what made the changes possible, it was those three. It certainly was not perfect but I think that each of them were asked to show, to demonstrate their level of commitment. John's, and I had just reviewed it, but heard when an art major who was part Native American did his senior project with the permission and advice of his senior advisor, put up a display of American flags in different presentations, and that offended a number of people, despite his reasoning and that the representation stood for a description, I don't know if you've seen the pictures or read about that.

JD: I haven't. I've heard descriptions.

PL: And of course having ROTC on campus and the military environment sort of exacerbated all that. And John and I talked about it: what kind of response? Well, we think students have academic freedom too. His professor certainly did and art is an expression. We also have the First Amendment. You know, there were just so many of those kind of legal precedence's, but that's not what people wanted to hear or know about, because it's so emotional. But what struck me about John in that incident was that yeah, it was a, as he told it to me, there was a financial supporter of the university who called him up to object strenuously. And you know, so much time has gone by, but my recollection was that if that display was not taken down, he was not going to continue supporting the university. And John said "I'm sorry you feel that way, that you feel that you can't support what we think is a good academic experience, and I thank you for all the support you provided us in the past. It will be your decision." He didn't back down but he did it just very nicely and said "you think about it."

[0:50:20]

We had an evening forum to which ROTC was invited and it was open forum and a discussion and it was the first time that many of those who came to object and to raise and you know, to just mess up, had heard of the experiences from the voices of Native American students and other students of color that brought forth this kind of feeling. And you know, this young man was twenty-five and he'd been in military and he named his display "In Memory of Ronald Hirsch." Ronald Hirsh was a kid who told him, when they were youngsters, "why don't you go back where you came from, you dirty Indian?" And as a kid he didn't know how to take that but as he grew up it just suddenly erupted and he said "this is the way I'm going to do it." And the article in the paper described each display but seemed most struck by the one by a manikin that was wrapped in the flag and then the flag was tied to the body by barbed wire and the manikin was hanging from a tree branch and the face, I don't know if the face showed, but hands and the feet were black. And that was the one that the paper, the article seemed to be—felt was the most offending, when you would think that that whole notion of the lynching might be one that more people would know about. But it certainly raised a lot of conversation, which is very critical to dealing with diversity issues. You don't talk about it, nothing's going to happen.

JD: Right.

PL: It will never resurface. It raised a lot of discussion and was kind of a door opener: "okay, now we can do something else because we, it's okay to say 'racism,' it's okay to talk about this stuff." And so there a was a series of those kinds of incidents.

With Paul Risser, he is—was—you know, as an indication of his response was when there were two kids at the roof of a dormitory who peed on a young African American who was unlocking the door to get in. And that, unfortunately, the same African American had firecrackers thrown at him when he walked by a fraternity house. And the community in Portland, African American community, said "we'd like you to come to Portland and talk to us," he and Les got in a car and hightailed it up there. And I said "I'm not going with you. This is something that you do," and this is what I will say

for the presidents: I never felt like I had to apologize for them or to speak on their behalf. I might have given them talking points and saying "be aware of this or this or this," but I was never there, like you see people beside the President of the United States, for example. I was not that kind of a spokesperson. I was a liaison but I was not a spokesperson.

So, I think that's an important point, that each president had the courage to speak out and say "okay, I can handle this." And then Tim, in his interim, was also—Tim was interesting because he had never had a lot of experience interacting with people of color and he was like a sponge, you know. And he shared his own existence, because Tim is multiracial, biracial, but he never had knew anybody. It was the first time he told anybody. He confessed to a group of outsiders. Not confess as much as just share. And I think that takes courage, too. So, when you say, you know, the presidents, they helped set the tone and helped that climate change. And it's something that has to be done constantly and consistently. Not just by them but by a community of people. But they're still the leader, you know, the bucks that stop at, they still need to step up. Just like Ed in his time has stepped up. You know, he's not bashful about his experiences and how he feels that people should be treated, not at all. And I've really admired him for that. I didn't have—I retired when he came on, so we didn't have time to have that same kind of relationship but you know, it was the president of the administration that supported the in perpetuity, the four cultural centers and the now added that women's center and the pride center and the international student center. Through part of that collection of homes away from homes for mainly students but also a different kind of home for the rest of the campus.

[0:55:36]

JD: So, since you bring that commitment from the university up about the cultural centers, talk a little about what that process was and your involvement in how that came about.

PL: Larry Roper was probably, I would say, primary and keeping it on the table. I wasn't seated at the table of elders, of all VPs and so on, but you know, his role and his students' respect for him put him in the right place at the right time. And there was fear because the centers were actually houses that had been lived in by different people, either visiting professors—first of all community families and then when the university acquired the property, then visiting professors. And each cultural center had to be born and grown out of the student and faculty activism. The first established was the Lonnie B. Harris and Lonnie was the first director of Educational Opportunities Program. And then Native American Longhouse probably was the very first. And then what started as a Hispanic Cultural Center is now the Centro Cultural César Chávez and then the final is the Asian Pacific Center and that one took a little time because there was this stereotypical image that Asians didn't need any help, you know? They were all successful; they could all come to college and just be super-duper dandy. And that's so far from the truth. Yeah, you only see the little bright lights but you don't see the masses.

And when we came—it became apparent that there was some discussion of the university wanting that property back because they are in prime spots, if you visit them. The most, furthest—at the edge of campus was the Asian Center, but still it was just right across the street from Oceanography. And then the Black Cultural Center's right on Monroe. And by crickey, the Native American Longhouse right smack dab across the street from the MU. Right in the heart of campus. And then César Chávez is across from Reser, a prime property for University mission; classrooms or whatever. So, when that inkling came around—and you know the Native American Longhouse was in a Quonset hut. Now, you and I already know what Quonset huts were when they were really used as Quonsets, but you know, people of color have patience. We just waited it out, wait it out. And our first thing was to make sure that none of these culture centers are going to go away. And the second, and it was coming up, that if anything was going to affect the cultural centers, the entity or the structure, there had to be input from the community that was affected and they had to give their okay. It was all signed off. The only institution in the whole U.S., I believe, that had such an agreement, that they went forward.

And it involved—well Larry and of course our president, finance, you know, the facilities people, ASOSU, it was—my role generally is behind the scenes. That's how my refu—I best work at, to make sure that no one's left out, I guess that's one of the fine—and that people are heard, that you're not left out and when you're brought in that you are acknowledged and welcomed and you have your say and somebody listens, and forth—somebody acts like they listen, they've done something. Even if it's a no, you've gotten a response out of them. My role was just setting up meetings, making sure there were people there and orchestrating, I guess that's what it is and I'm, in some ways I felt like a symphony conductor, you know? Just making sure the parts came in the right time, the sections of the orchestra came in the right time. We had this grand signing ceremony in the MU Lounge, you know, this long table with all the dignitaries of the university and student

representatives of the cultural centers and their representatives from their advisory groups. Yeah, those are some of those highlight moments.

[1:00:29]

And are they mine? No. I just was lucky enough to play a part in it, out of all the things that have happened. There's not a single thing that you could say, that I would recognize. Or maybe no one else would either, say "oh yeah, that's a Phyllis thing." No. But that's diversity, and that, that's community. When you involve and bring together people who want to do it because they want to do it, not because they have to do it and they're forced to do it or they're legislated into it or their jobs are threatened or they're—they need to do it from here [indicates heart] and from here [indicates head]. You got to have a little of both, yeah.

JD: So, that was near the end of your time.

PL: You mean what I talked about?

JD: The covenant signing.

PL: That was in 2002, yeah. I think it was in 2002.

JD: Okay. That's right, that's what I have.

PL: I didn't know at that time I was going to retire, by the way.

JD: Oh, okay. Well, really what I wanted to do was just kind of back up a little, because you know, at that point you had been the director of the Office of Multicultural Affairs for a number of years and I'd like to kind of walk back to that early point. It was a new creation, you're coming in, you were, had certainly some familiarity with the campus, having been a graduate student here, just perhaps recall a bit as you can the process of setting up this new office and how you started to approach the different segments of the campus and how you sorted through that and perhaps who you worked with on that.

PL: Working with everybody, because Multicultural Affairs is a campus affair. It's not student affairs. I sometimes feel I was hired to fix the kids, when just, like you heard me earlier, saying "you can't fix people," and you really can't fix a moving student body, just like you can't fix a moving faculty, either. So you know, you're just going to be really, truly on a treadmill. But if you have a campus that has expectations and people choose to come here or they land here and they know what kinds of expectations are there, what are acceptable behaviors, what are not acceptable behaviors; we have something to work on. So, my intent was what do we need to do to create this environment?

So, I think the first thing we did is we threw a party. And I'll say we because at that time the Indian Education Office had been placed with Multicultural Affairs. It was the first education office that focused on a specific ethnic racial group. But I had, I was blessed with a wonderful, I'll call an admin, who had been on campus a number of years, knew people but she was just knew the system. And we threw a party. We threw a party that involved the students and each student group could contribute whatever they want to have an open house. And it was—it was semi-Chinese, semi-traditional, but semi-everything. So, we had dancers from the North Island, we had poetry from the black students, we had step dancing, but it was like "this is your opus. Not just yours alone, but people don't know who you are except when there's problems."

So that was one piece, was how can I learn to work with students? Great allies. EOP people were super because they're the ones who had the most contact with students of color. It was easy to go to ASOSU because there's some tradition and they just feel so secure in their positions. But it took a while to bring them on because most of them had not had experience with people not like themselves. At that time, you know, I would say a close majority of students were probably from small town Oregon.

JD: Sure.

[1:05:01]

PL: So, and then where Elaine came in the most was that she said "okay here, I've scheduled you with all the deans and here's from their department head" and I just went trekking out and said "hello" and found people who just really were welcoming, because I was there to offer a service rather than demand that they toe the line. And whatever the line—and it was their imagination, where the line was. And I think a common theme was, because we knew what the right, what do they need to bolster their student enrollment and they really wanted more students of color for out—and I didn't ask why they wanted more students of color. They wanted them. Then what are we going to do, what can I help you do to get more students of color?

And so a lot of them were introduced to the Board of Visitors. They came to the quarterly meetings and they talked about their aims and their goals and their vision for their department. So, there was hook-up from the community people directly with faculty people, because I was not going to be the conduit. It just doesn't work if you have to wait for somebody to say "okay, you can talk to the Dean of Science." No, you go, you call up Fred Horne, who was Dean at the time of Science, tell him who you are or you met and you know, you want to talk with him.

And the people were well—John set the example because his door was always open. He told us that. But the Board of Visitors, he said if they said they're from the Board of Visitors, that's how they identified themselves, come on in, or the quickest appointment. He did the same thing with his students once we got the outfits going. If the students want to come and talk to me, come on in. I mean students even had a sit-in on...was that John? I think it was during Paul's, maybe John's time and Paul's—just waiting for him. Because he said they could. I mean, he told them they could. So, it was setting up an environment and meeting a lot of people but having conversations like maybe you and I are having, like our common ground and where we come from.

You know, as people who promoted diversity as a group in the early days in the seventies, it was pretty antagonistic in trying to bring the issues to the forefront. It was very demanding, it was very loud and there was very little room for discussion, to hear from both sides, and that's another lesson learned, was we've got to hear both sides. I can't believe—and I do believe this, I have never met anybody I can call a genuine racist or a genuine bigot. I've met a lot of people who never knew. Now, if they're lying and say "I never knew," that's okay, I take you at face value. But I really cannot say somebody—the closest were some white supremacy young militant wannabes from Albany who marched, who walked on campus with their rifles and their hunting knives and their boots kind of thing. But none of the faculty or the staff, townspeople, for that matter.

So, it was bringing, talking to people, finding out about them rather than them finding out about me and finding out where there was some commonalities. And so, working with students and staff and faculty all at the same time in different ways was a way to create that community rather than in the sequential, because by the time you get here, these folks down here would have forgotten or been involved in something else. So, creating integrated communities that involved people that had not come together before; there had been the traditional separation of "these are student issues" and that "these are academic issues" and never the two shall meet, without really realizing that if this—that neither would succeed if they didn't have some kind of common knowledge and understanding and expectations. So, that was it. I served on every committee I could get on. I served on a lot of search committees, Faculty Senate, Executive Committee and just, and tried to encourage a broader perspective, whatever it was we were doing.

[1:09:37]

And you know, curriculum changed, but that came from the faculty. That Difference, Power, and Discrimination? I say that's faculty-emanated, you know? It wasn't a decree from the Provost. But since the faculty at OSU had a tradition of creating curriculum and bringing it to the administration, it was natural to bring this diversity. And you know, that's a baccalaureate requirement. You don't graduate without a course from that program. Now that's community. That's bringing people together to work on it. We had departments who co-sponsored events who had never spoke—there was so many silos on this campus. Oh, so many silos, but to get people to sit down, say "let's together sponsor, we can each pitch in a hundred bucks from our budgets, because none of us can afford the whole thing," by crickey they enjoyed it. I had professors who came who said "this will never happen," department heads who'd say it would never happen, "they don't ever give us any money." I said "they're not giving you money, they're giving the group money," you know, the group sponsor. "Oh, okay."

But you know, it was just those little a-ha's that I was just so fortunate to be a part and to observe and to see—and that's not to say that there were not times of dissension and anger, but if you don't have that, you know you're not moving, either. If everybody is just saying "mhmm, mhmm, we'll go right along with you," that scares the heck out of me. That means nobody's thinking. I know that sounds a little counterintuitive, but you know, it was just trying to bring groups of people together.

But there were so many ways that this campus isolated people, unintentionally as much as intentionally. There was a class and caste system on this campus, both administratively and academically. And that was patterned in the way that ASOSU was—the student government was built, you know. When I came, the student government was run by the fraternity or sorority representatives. And because they were the kids who came out of high school student body experiences, they could move right into it, whereas most of our students of color were not part of that unless they were fortunate enough to actually go to a non-segregated school where they were the student body government. But they were usually from out of state, because Oregon's entire population, and certainly Portland's, was so miniscule.

So, it was exposing people to new experiences. The ASOS kids were not bad. They had a little snooty, you know, they felt they were privileged. And that's the other thing we worked, we talked about privilege, but it was never really couched first "you have privilege and we're going to take it away from you," it was "privilege and how can we spread it," that was kind of the theme. And as I say, it has a lot of opportunities, a lot of people. And it wasn't just, you know, Affirmative Action. Poor Affirmative Action, they kind of got shunted on, because they had to be concerned with compliance at that time. And they didn't have that freedom that I had, that—by freedom I mean people could talk to me and not worry about a law. So, I had—and my office was not in the Ad. building. That was another blessing. We were in Snell Hall which is the same building where student activities and I think Foundation was there at the time, ELI, the English Language Institute was there, and it was a very multicultural building. And we had people stop in all the time just to chat, which would not have happened if we were in the administration building.

So, there were a lot of things that happened we could call serendipitous because I don't think it was, you know, I never felt like things had to be manipulated, in the most positive sense, that it was more like "build it and they'll come," you know like in Baseball Field. If you provide an opportunity, someone's going to grab it. The Martin Luther King celebration, it had been this kind of os—by the way, John Byrne was the person who said "we will have a day with no classes so people can really observe the birthday". Not a day off but of course it's turned into that. But also because we have the date, we were able to have the two week MLK celebration from my office group that had existed. It involved students, faculty, staff and community people, all on an equal basis. First time that that had ever happened on this campus, where kids did not feel they had to defer. And we brought in student representatives from groups that were, had been previously not been invited to participate in this kind of thing. The LGBT students were just in tears at the opportunity to interact with kids in this kind of environment that was not one where they had to be fearful. You know, as an example.

[1:15:18]

So again, it's creating the opportunities. So, of course I remember all the good stuff but I do remember some of the bad stuff and, you know, and the continuing need that we must be vigilant, that we can't say "things had been good back then and so it's going to be good from now on."

JD: Right.

PL: It's just, it's continuous vigilance.

JD: Right. And you've mostly been talking about the campus atmosphere from the perspective of what was happening between students, faculty, administration, kind of internal issues that came up, but certainly OSU is both part of the surrounding city of Corvallis, the State of Oregon and, quite honestly, national and international often, of course, come to campus. And maybe talk about sort of how you and your office dealt with some of the big national issues that came up during your tenure here.

PL: 9/11?

JD: Mhmm.

PL: We have a significant international population and of that population I think there was a significant number of students who were of the Muslim faith. At that time we did, the mosque was in operation and I got in touch with Mohamed Siala who was the Imam at that time, the religious leader, and talked about how we would approach it as a community, Corvallis, and the university, protected the—supporting the students and their families that live in the community. So, that brought together a working group on campus. But then they started to talk to each other outside of campus and we didn't have any incidences. We have, in fact people came forward who might have been reluctant in any other circumstances, to speak with family members. And I think teachers probably talked about the incident in school so that knowingly or unknowingly in their experience could devise some modicum of security for the kids in school. I didn't—I wasn't aware of any open hostility. There might have been like name-calling or throwing things. The police were invited and at that time the police was not very culturally aware or diverse but they were working on it, but they wanted to do the right thing.

So, they were—that's the other thing is the police were generally really open to hearing and learning. So, my relationship with the police department has always been on a "you scratch my back, I scratch your back," because we both have a lot to learn. And our goals are the same, that we are—it's our students that we're working with and insuring that they have a good academic experience. That wasn't always done but at least we had a relationship and I thought I did—there were open doors either way. But that's where your classes and caste system comes up, is that the police officer says "who am I supposed to go to for all these?"

So, 9/11 was the biggest national event that impacted the campus and my recollection that while none of us knew really what to do, the emphasis is "we need to take care of our own," our own meaning the students. We need to provide every support but somebody's going to have to tell us what support we need to provide. We need—do we need set places on campus where people can just go to when it just seems so overwhelming? I mean those are the kinds of things which different people took care of. And you know, I'm only an office of one so my job is where do we build that depth and breadth of resources.

With the town, I helped start a community alliance for diversity that brought in business, police, city government and just started discussions which had never happened before. The only time town and government got together was when there was a problem. So, that was kind of a door-opener in saying hey, you know, we've never done this before. It had a lot of help from the county government and mayor Charlie Vars at that time was the city impetus. So, and that was another thing and that has had its ups and downs and evolutions and so on.

[1:20:41]

As I said earlier, I was occasionally asked to go to the court and sit in on when students, particularly students of color, were involved. And usually it's a listening post and they come back and say "okay, this is what you do," you know, "this is what you can consider doing, here are the alternatives." The kids have to get—be back in school. The kids have to realize that there's consequences to what they did. But at the same time, I went to police and said "maybe you didn't read them right," Not the rights, but you didn't read their behavior right. An example, I had several occasions where kids were hauled in for noise and I, well you know, some of us talk pretty loudly and we gesticulate a lot, talk with our hands and our arms, and that was threatening to some people. So, that behavior was seen as a negative, deserving of some kind of citation. Those are the kinds of incidences that I may have had interaction with outside.

But we also had a great national conference on campus and many of the students—it was from the College of Forestry and it was to focus, emphasize minority participation in the forest industry, in forest education. So, it brought students from the historically black colleges in the southeast and throughout the country. A majority of the invited students were from those areas. And so the College of Forestry and group of people on campus and people who were off campus, we got together and said "how do we put this together so it's a benefit for everybody?" Chamber got involved, they made signs: "welcome students to Corvallis, you got a question, come on in." We went—we being members of the group—went to Rotary, we went to the city, the city counselor, county government, Kiwanis, Lions, Chamber and just talked with them and said "here's what's coming and here's why we're here," because our students of color, especially African American students, there were just so many students walking downtown and just getting stereo—people actually walking on the other side of the street, women grabbing onto their handbags, I mean those were out, you know, very overt kinds of behavior, and said we can't have this. And we named these kinds of behaviors to people and some of them said "well, we didn't know what was going on." Well, I think people unconsciously do this.

Well, it was a very, very successful event and at the closing ceremonies the dean at that time, George Brown, said "should I ask this question?" I said "what is it?" "Shall I ask them if they had a good time?" I said "why not?" and it was a resounding "yes." So he said "would you like to come back to Corvallis?" "Oh, yes." And for many of them it was their first experience in an overly white community and their first experience interacting with white kids, as well as even out of town. So yeah, we tried to do some of those things. And I think we all learned lessons that we tried to replicate or adapt or use. So you know, just off of the top of my head those are the ones that outside.

But I worked some with the District Attorney's office in how do we best work with issues that come up. One of the first things I'd say to students of color when I had a chance is "don't hit. It doesn't matter how right you are, hitting constitutes assault and so you may be morally right, like 'you called me a name and I'm going to pop you one;' you assaulted them and you will get the burden of grief."

[1:25:01]

So it, you know, teaching, in teaching those things—"you get stopped by the police, put your hands on the wheel. Eleven o'clock, one o'clock." And I wasn't the only one. This was a kind of a community teaching on how to survive at OSU. Similar kinds of things: how do you interact with students from OSU. But that's still an issue, you know? Fraternity parties, that was Work Week. That's when I had my most interaction with the police. You know what Work Week is?

JD: I do not.

PL: It's the week before the term starts or the week most students come back. Fraternities open up their house, sororities open up their houses, ostensibly clean up but they also have drinking parties and a lot of drinking going on. And so it's not just noise but all the accompanying behavior. That has tamed down. And because at that time the university said "because they're off campus we have no legal jurisdiction." Yes they're our students but there wasn't anything in place like there is now. And so it was hands tied on the campus and the police saying "we haven't got enough manpower to go to every fraternity house." So, those are some of my more negative interactions that grew out of request from the university, training the police, for example, and having the opportunity to talk to the chief anytime I needed to make a call, whether it just be connecting. So yeah, it's those people connections, building relationships, building broad and deep resources of multiple people, people who may have considered themselves at odds to begin with. But that's a challenge, that's—seeing those kinds of things happen is what drives me in this category. You know, I'm not going to change the world.

JD: As you've been talking, and just kind of my background research, there seems to be this, I don't know if it's tension or balance, in that you do bring this very collaborative, inclusive approach to your work, but you're also working to change people and perhaps to change long-seated cultural beliefs, assumptions, activities, and so that requires a certain amount of backbone and kind of—

PL: It's tenacity, persistence, knowing you're going to be doing it over and over and over again, but maybe in different ways, because people learn differently. They hear differently. It's having those allies to work with or brainstorm with or to—the more allies you could bring in, then the more you are able to reach a broader audience. And when they see those different allies, they will see it's not a one note thing. It's not because she does it because she's a women, she does it because she's Asian or she's Chinese or she's bilingual, you know. None of those things that people say, that people use an excuse for them not doing it because they either have or don't have it, but when they see such a multitude of people, a growing group, they're going to be able to connect with somebody. And that's where you get that behavior change. I think not because they don't look at me because I have people all the time who are counting on fingers how they're not like me and "yeah it's okay for you to say it because you're one of them" or "it's okay for you to bring it up because you're one of them and your people will benefit." Those are comments that have been given back to me: "your people will benefit, no wonder." It's changing that "you" and "I" to "our" and "we." I know that sounds really kind of Pollyannaish, but in the end that's what creates an environment. It's, you know, we don't have a dictator here and don't expect to have a dictator where it's only one man or one woman and one way.

So, as long as we're not that, we're going to have to define it as broadly as we can and act it. You know, changing policy, that's something a group of us did, change hiring policy, that anybody who was hired in a supervisory, administrative position must have demonstrated experience in diversity. Not just saying "oh yeah, I'm comfortable working with people," tell us what you've done.

[1:30:00]

So, that's a hiring policy. That was, you know, Human Resources, Affirmative Action, search committee members, I was just part of that group. Setting up all the student—some of the first responders, I think is one of the primaries of people on campus that students, faculty or staff could go to when there was any kind of critical issue or any kind of problem, personal or whatever that it didn't have to be a specific person or a specific office but that we're all here or there are a number of us here and this is our expertise and we may be able to find resources. But it was that silo-ing I think that created so much friction and antagonism, like "I don't deserve to go there, I'm not one of them" or "I can't go to that cultural center because I am not of that culture" or even in a culture event. But breaking down those artificial barriers, you can have them; just don't inflict them on somebody else.

JD: And I'm not quite sure exactly what your role was in, with Ethnic Studies. In my research it seemed like there was some connection there as far as—

PL: That's a lot of behind the scenes, discussions with faculty, a lot of talking with the head of the department and to some of the faculty and some of the things that they wanted to do in that—but I was guest lecturing, you might call it, in some of the classes but I was never part of the faculty. And there were times when I wanted to be academically associated but there were other times when I was glad I was not, because it gave me more freedom to move into different entities on campus. But the one that I never really got involved with was athletics. It's just a—and I'll just leave it at that. That services were available to them but I was only reach out in really severe crises and it was more for a sounding board more than anything else.

So, I think that was part of the class and caste system and the fear of talking out of turn or who is the spokesperson, you know, those are things that we all learn that we—just like when I worked at Kaiser, we knew what we could and could not say. I mean absolutely. It was like the first thing you learned when you went there. And same thing at Portland State, you learned those things. But there's a lot of, there was a lot of protectiveness. There was this strong bit of territoriality, provincialism, but that's the stuff that you sort of nip away at the edges and say "hey it's safe, you know, it's okay, it's okay. You're still who you are but you don't have to keep people out or exclude them."

And that, I'm going to have to give credit to the director of the—our team, the Civil Rights team, because his belief was the more power you give away the more power comes back to you. And—

JD: And what was the name of the person you're referring to?

PL: His name's Dick Withycombe. He's another one of my—you know, most of my mentors, if not all of them, and it might have been the time I grew up in, he, whenever there was any kind of a power struggle that he sensed, either within our group or with districts, he would always say at some place during our discussion "the more power you give away the more power you get back." And that power is people opening up to you. It's not giving away your rights, it's not giving you permission to beat me up, but it's giving me permission to be more open to hearing you and maybe you hearing me.

So, I always remembered that and I, you know, I call upon it from once—I think about it when I am in meetings and there are people who are emotionally and physically tight-lipped. They're afraid if they say something that they're going to lose it. And I think the opposite is true and the few times that I've seen somebody try to really say "oh, you're going to give me power, then I'm going to take it," he didn't have to do anything. Everybody around him took care of that person who was out to become Emperor of Everything, because the people around knew that the power was in the group and not just in one person.

[1:35:05]

And I think that's kind of part of the work that I do with the collaboration. The power is in the group. I've never had to dress down anybody because the group took care of it. If anybody was really extreme, the group took care of it. And kids would come in and complain about professors and I said "what would you like to happen and then how can we make that happen? How can you make that happen? What has to be in place?" Kids got the power back, "I'm in control of myself first and that gives me my power to do what I need to do." And the kid's complaints generally often bordered on

disrespect, by the professor or another student that they dealt with, based on their race or gender or orientation or religion, those factors. Take it back, it's yours. So, I don't know if that answers your question.

JD: It does. And I, as I was reading and listening to you speak, sort of the groups that you dealt with and your mission, I guess, in that office was really broad and encompassed many, many different groups and did you feel like you were proactive in how you both approached and assisted those groups, or maybe sometimes it was by virtue of what was going on, reactive?

PL: I think all of that happened, depending on the situation and the need and the criticality of the issues. Not everything I tried worked. We tried to put together a university diversity plan that just really kind of—it just went off in so many different places, it'd just kind of sputter out. And there actually wasn't quite time. I believe in timeliness, that things happen for a reason and we know we—we made a valiant effort. People put in a lot of time, but it just didn't gel. And the closest thing to it gelling was created by a team of students and faculty and administrated not by a more traditional, academic dean, department head, faculty group. So—and that was a lesson learned.

JD: And what was that initiative that you're referring to?

PL: You mean the one that the students put together? It was recommendations on how the university could respond to the more...the more recently occurring sets of incidences. Not the one that started my office but subsequent ones, 'cause they're going on all the time. And they came up with a very broad set of recommendations and they called themselves TEAM: Together Everyone Achieves More and made them—a group of us worked with students over the summer. Larry sponsored the group and they came out with recommendations that affected every facet of the university, from curriculum to human resources to contractors, to vendor to community relations, presented it to the president's cabinet and it was accepted and then the president—I mean the cabinet—had to make progress reports. That was a group of students, faculty and staff, all working on an equal basis. Actually, the faculty on that, in that group, we acted like staff for the students, you know, we did the typing, we did the stapling, we did the copying. And also, when we were—because of who we were, we were able to give them guidelines so that they didn't stray off or "you know, we really can't do that because there's this, so let's not spend more time on that because there's no way we can change the law. So, we can't do this."

So that's the kind of work that we did with this group. And that's usually how I work with groups. It's not my group, because the first thing we do is if I—when I call a group together or someone says "oh yeah, that's a good idea, who's going to chair it?" "Not me, there's only one of me." So, who's going to chair it? And that probably is one of the most, most producing things I've seen around here, because then everybody helps whoever that person is because they didn't want to do that. I don't know if that's the motive, but yeah.

[1:40:02]

Yeah, I know I had some failures that I regretted but, interesting enough, some other things came along that said well, maybe this is what you should have been doing and not that. But for the most part I would say that my reward comes from people feel they're capable of doing and having their own power to do it and not because it was somebody's law that they don't even understand.

JD: Right. So, we've been talking a lot about your specific work here and the groups that you worked with on campus, but you also had some professional affiliations and organizations, you know, and I guess there needs to be those associations to kind of keep replenishing your knowledge base and your connections with peers and what's going on. Maybe talk a little about that aspect of your career.

PL: Well, the two that were probably most associated directly with my work was American Association of University Administrators that I was invited to join by a previous Affirmative Action Director who had moved onto University of Virginia. And just meeting colleagues from throughout the county, but they were not diversity people. They were people who were college presidents or some level within a college administration. And it was such a learning experience because they were small colleges, middle colleges, private colleges, and we even had some technical, proprietary colleges. So, it was a very broad group of people. But it helped me appreciate what was going on here and to understand better. And it was also a group that I could sort of bounce ideas without fear of somebody saying "did you see what Phyllis was wondering?" Because you know how people run away with an idea even though you—it's just thinking.

And then the other group that I really valued being on, belonging to, was a group that John Byrne pointed me to. He was President, National President—I call it NASULC because it's too long: National Association of Universities and Colleges—Land Grant Colleges and Universities, or something, this organization So, it's immense, you know. One from every state. And that was an exciting, interesting group because it had been the—it was a very, it was a very old group. It has a wonderful history. Well, he started a new subgroup, branch that had to do with diversity during the time that John was President. So, I said "okay" and that was very rewarding, because then, in that small group got to interact with people doing similar work but in different situations. And then I got to work with a much larger group of university presidents and provosts, which was the parent organization.

So, those two in particular, in the many years that I've served on the committees, either as an officer or the director or in some kind of active way, helped my professional development, just a lot. And in my development as a person, well that also helped as a person because I had to learn to interact with people in a much different way, that I don't have to say "President so-and-so," I could call him "Joe." That's how things were. And that takes learning to do that enough. My—culturally I'm just sort of trained to always be compliant, acquiescent, but I try to learn to be different. So, I often say I am—there's my American half and there's my Chinese half. But in the communities, within the community, I was active in several groups in Corvallis in the Chamber of Commerce as the university's rep and the Community Alliance for Diversity and currently I'm in the Benton County Budget Committee. This math-phobic person. I'm one of the citizen members. There's three citizen members and three commissioners.

I'm also, I'm sitting on the Community Police Review Board and we're kind of last arbiters if there's any situations and citizens aren't—or residents aren't satisfied with the resolution. I also sit on the board of the Community Health Centers of Benton and Linn Counties, which are federally qualified health centers that are set-up to—for underserved people, and worked on that, the development of those health centers.

[1:45:20]

So, I keep that and then undergirding on that, I worked with a group in Portland and we did training on facilitators, to conduct difficult conversations, primarily on racism. And this is through a group called—an initiative called the Uniting in Racism Foundation, which was, sounded like we were for racism but we actually were—oh, Uniting to Understand Racism. And then it ultimately merged with a grassroots group and still does the same work, except it just broadened its base. And that has been the work that keeps me home and to being current in practice and competent in the application of diversity. So, it's a combination of personal relationships, professional relationships, service relationships.

And then I've been active with a group that serves primarily immigrant and newcomers from the Asian countries in the Portland area, in health and civic engagement and education issues. I've been primarily working in education, interfacing Portland public schools. And the implica—people I'm working with on campus is the part of the Committee Advisory Board for the College of Public Health and Human Services. And this Friday we're meeting but also listening to Eddie give his State of the Union economic speech in Portland. So, that's a very, very wonderful board to sit on; an active group of people interested—but the college itself is doing so many wonderful things, and really things that impact on the health of people, whether locally or internationally.

I just, you know, am in awe of Tammy Bray and the way that she has—she's the Dean—and has, I'll have to use "orchestrated," but invited people and involved people, and I think, you know, which is so much like me. I—sometimes people mistake us for each other. But you know, she is such an outstanding researcher but such an outstanding administrator and a people person, you know? You don't often get that mix. And she's led the hiring of some of the most fantastic people you could ever hope to meet and brought in funding and support from groups. So yeah, that kind of keeps me busy.

JD: So, your retirement from your position as the director of OMA in 2003 was only kind of semi-retirement.

PL: Yes. My friends say "oh yeah, you just gave up your paycheck, you're still doing it, you can't let it go." Well yeah, I've cut down. It's nice to not have those committee meetings and whether or I wanted to go or not I had to be there because you need—I felt it was important to have a face, even if I said nothing, have a face to say "not everybody in this room is alike. Don't forget." To do that without having to actually say that or say "okay, you guys, once again you guys have forgotten about this group or that group or that group," because it just doesn't compute in your experience.

That is, that's the worst way you can bring the diversity about. But I just would listen and contribute when I can. So, there were lots and lots of committee meetings. My calendar, it was like I was never home. And so I did a lot of work at night and after hours. I tried to attend as many student activities as I could because they needed to see I was not a typical administrator.

For my whole time here, most everyone, students, faculty, staff, thought I worked for Larry. I said "hey that's okay, I wouldn't mind working for you, Larry." But you know, some people may have said "well you need to do this because you work for the president, because of your connection to the president. I don't want to get in trouble." That's a bad way to do it. That's like saying "I'm going to tell your mom. If you don't behave I'm going to tell your mom."

[1:50:08]

JD: Well, somewhere along the line people thought you were—had done a fine job, or I'm guessing they wouldn't have created the Phyllis S. Lee award.

PL: Oh, yeah I thought it should have been a collective award because nothing—there wasn't anything I did that was just an individual. And that—and you know that was association with a Martin Luther King celebration but that wouldn't have happened without that committee. From day one people came—the only thing I did was that I fed them. Because we met at three-thirty in the afternoon, you know. Health wise, nutrition wise, that's a downtime. And we had people who left our meetings to go to another classroom that hadn't eaten. I would say, you know—but people really shared and they really enjoy being with each other and coming up with ideas that they got to make decision like the theme and the speakers and the emcees and the award letters. So you know, none of it, and so I'm still a bit uncomfortable with that. And I've had similar awards that—because none of this ever...I just have to insist that they have to say "what she did, those kind of things that she thought that inspired, that Dr. King did," but somehow that gets lost in the sayings.

So, it's not me. You're really honoring the man's non-violent and collective, collaborative way of trying to bring about change. Now, he wasn't perfect either, I mean, but he did so much that other people could pick up and do. And oh yeah, the man had an ego, but show me a man who doesn't, you know? And especially at that time. If you didn't have an ego, you wouldn't survive; he couldn't have done what he did. So, that doesn't bother me. But it's really his teaching, and that's what I wish people would honor, is that everybody can serve; you don't have to be a big name boop-de-boop person. Everybody can do good. Everybody can collaborate and you can get things done without killing each other.

JD: Well, I wanted to offer you a chance to talk about anything that maybe I haven't specifically asked you about and then just to get your, perhaps, final reflections on your time at OSU. And you touched a little with your discussion about Tammy Bray or your—about kind of where OSU is going, but things that you see about...

PL: Well, probably a thing I notice most is how the campus has changed. Not only visually in the buildings and the size of it but it's the makeup of its student body, the makeup of its faculty and the fact that it is more diverse. But accompanied with that, there's still those chronic issues that inhibit people from being the best or acquiring and achieving the best. And there's got to be some way, it's, there's something that we can continue doing and that continues my interest in the campus because I want to see it continually grow. And so part of me says "it's the size," but the other part is, looking at the size, is people seem to be really overladen with expectations. You know, certainly the "publish or perish," the service, the advising, grant-writing, all the trains and the trappings, going before legislature, that somehow the educational aspects get lost. But I have hope. I'm an eternal optimist. You cannot be in diversity work and not be an optimist. You would have given up back in the Civil War, I think.

[1:54:46]

But it's like where are those opportunities, what can we do? And that's why I was delighted to serve on campus committee and to see, at least in this part of the campus, things are going on. I hear from my friends in EOP, in the programs that they're doing in bringing more students, and that's encouraging. I feel great about students graduating, student athletes. I still think there's a lot more can be done, but how do we do it and who does it kind of thing. So, retiring, I'd probably have those same questions if I was still working. I would have the same questions if I was still working, and probably feeling overladen, you know, as that one-person office. But because I'm so optimist, I think there's a way. We just have to work, find ways to bring more people to participate more so that the person or the task, I'll call it the task, because a

burden pushes people down, but the task is more collectively addressed. And that's what I would hope not to be forgotten in the scheme of things as OSU progresses as an institution, that it—it takes time out to smell the rose and reflect and not just say "ain't we grand, we got one point whatever billion." Yes, and now what are we going to do with that one point one billion? Is it going to change, is it going to relieve, is it going to supplement, heaven forbid not supplant anything, but what can we build with that.

So, those are my ponderings, which is why I continue to assess our Women's Center Advisory Committee, because that's you know, that'll never go away, the need to be, any more than it would be to, say the cultural centers, or the need to have cultural centers. We have a lot of resistance, because people say "well, the reason you come to college is so you can learn to live with people." Well, let's put it this way: I find that the students of color, in the end, probably learn better than the students not of color, because the students of color are just ignored, never involved, never invited, but house—we even had fraternities who would want to use the house for study sessions. I don't know if they still do but they did at the time I was here. There was a private place, they'd set up a troop of the guys and said "we'll spend two hours here." I think maybe they're too active, the center's too active now to have that open time.

But I think the reason I have given you those thoughts is because there has been such progress and change in the environment and because there have been so many people who have given so much to be part of that. And that it's a collective thing and you know, it isn't, say, "okay, it's now the Affirmative Action's Office to do it," you know, "my office no longer exists, so it's gone over to Affirmative Action, so it's somebody's ball game but it's not mine." And I really would like people to say "it's our ball game." And so, you know, I just see Oregon State being, becoming better at what it does without forgetting what it came from and how it got to where it is today, to recognize the jewels on this campus. Oftentimes students, faculty and staff of color that are missed. I think that will be a perpetual need, to be vigilant. But I'm optimistic about this place. And I've seen some young people graduate from here who've gone on to wonderful careers in government and in law and in public service. And that, those are the encouraging things. I still hear from many of them, which is a nice "this is what I'm doing," and they're practically up to their grandkids and—but you know, I think being involved in education is a wonderful to spend your life. Wherever it is in education, I think it's a wonderful way and a wonderful place to spend your time. I don't know what else I would add to that.

JD: That seems like a wonderful set of recollections and I thank you very much for taking the time to share them.

PL: Well, I thank you Jan, I mean it just, I think about them but I never talk about them much and you just brought up so many memories.

JD: Great.

PL: I just hope that they have been accurately reflected.

JD: Well, and they will exist in the university archives for many other people to access beyond the two of us.

PL: I know that's right, they'll be thinking like "man, she's really gone dingy, she's just looking at the world through rose-colored glasses."

JD: No.

PL: But no, it's a good life.

JD: Alright, thank you.

PL: Thank you.

[Interview ends: 2:00:13]