

Nelson Armstrong '71
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
Dartmouth Black Lives
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Transcribed by Liana Laremont

LAREMONT: Alright, so my name is Liana Laremont and I am at Berry Library at 6025 Main Street in Hanover, New Hampshire and I'm doing a Zoom interview with Nelson Armstrong, who's in Newport News, Virginia. Today is October 27, 2021, and this is an interview for the Dartmouth Black Lives Oral History Project. Hi Nelson, thank you so much for joining me today. First, I'd like to learn a little bit more about your childhood, can you please state when and where you were born.

ARMSTRONG: Well, I was born right here in Newport News, Virginia back in the year 1950. My birthday is January 7 so I claim the whole year because I was born at the very beginning of the year. My mom and dad are Fred and Carissa Armstrong, I'm lucky enough to have four siblings: an older brother and older sister, a younger sister, and a younger brother so I'm the middle of five.

LAREMONT: Oh wow that's a big family. What was your childhood like?

ARMSTRONG: In my head, of course, it seems pretty normal. I went to Booker T. Washington elementary school, which is actually right down the street from where I live right now. So I get to see my elementary school every day. My brothers and sisters, the five of us, live next door to a family that had five kids as well. And on the other side of that house, there were another five kids. Across the street there were five kids. So there were plenty of folks to play with and grow up with. My dad was a barber, he owned his own barber shop and so forth, so in our eyes, he was a professional. My mom was a nurse, again, so in our eyes, she was a professional, so we thought we were growing up and doing pretty good, and all was well. So it's a pretty normal childhood, I like to think. We did the same kinds of things I think everybody else in the neighborhood did. What I didn't know was that there were folks out there living lives that were a

whole lot better than ours. As a kid, I guess, I never thought of myself as someone who didn't have. And what you don't have, you don't miss. So we were pretty happy growing up, I gotta say, and our ages are so close together as siblings that we did a whole lot of things together. Going to school, going to church, doing things around in the neighborhood and so forth, so that felt pretty good. Mom and dad were always the type to say you got to do your homework, you got to do your chores, so to speak, and you got to do things together, and I think they taught us an awful lot about how you get along and then how you help folks and how folks help you. My mom taught all of us a wonderful lesson that we grew up with, and it was about sharing. So, if you have something, and you were going to share it with a sibling, one of you had to cut it in half. And whoever cut it, the other person gets to choose, so you learn a lot about sharing and togetherness and groups and stuff like that, from home. That kind of thing has carried with all five of us, and luckily, all five of us live within a five mile radius of each other, right now, so we still see each other a fair bit.

LAREMONT: Oh that's awesome, so what would you say your community was like at home, in Newport News? It sounds like it was very tight knit.

ARMSTRONG: It was and still is. It was a totally Black neighborhood back in the day and is still probably 97-98% a Black neighborhood now. It's residential, very lucky about that, we live across the street from a very large church. So the folks that live in the block that I live in, we always tend to think we live in the best block in the whole community. We were lucky enough to know a lot of professional people, all of whom were Black. So lawyers, doctors, like I said, my mom was a nurse, the people in the hospital and so forth. The community worked together a great deal, by the time I was in high school, and you start to learn about the rest of the world, you start to learn a little bit more about the things you don't have that other people have, but the teachers were probably more important, I think, in the neighborhood than folks would always give credit for. Teachers tend to see things in young people that other folks don't see, so they open doors for youngsters to do better and do better and do better. And those teachers gave us opportunities inside and outside of our high school, which made a tremendous difference as

we thought about going off to college. My high school, I dare say, was a step ahead of the rest of the world, in that way, because they opened up so many things for us outside of that high school. And my dad owning his own barbershop taught me a little bit about the business world, and how you treat people in that business world, and my mom being a nurse told us a lot about caring for one another and yourself. So, pretty blessed, I think.

LAREMONT: You mentioned your school, Booker T. Washington. Was it a private school? Or public school? Was it coed?

ARMSTRONG: Booker T. Washington elementary school was a public school. It still is today, it is much more like a stem school, but it still is a public school. It was all Black when I went to school there. It is not anymore, and now there is a tendency, because it's not all Black, for part of the community to want to call it the Washington school, I think, because some of the people that go to school there now don't look like the rest of us, they kind of want people to think George Washington, instead of Booker T. Washington, but we never let anybody get away with that. It was a coed school. So you knew the kids from the block, because we all went to that school together. It wasn't a very big school. But I happen to live in Newport News which is right next to Hampton, Virginia so Hampton Institute, now known as Hampton University, was a Black school that was nearby and it's the school that Booker T. Washington went to and historically, Booker T. Washington was quite the figure because of his talk about education and how we should learn things. Not just big math and science, but know the little stuff, the technical stuff, the labor kind of things, so that you can have something to fall back on and have something to grow with as you went out into the world of work. And on Hampton Institute, again, Hampton University, on that campus they have a tree called the emancipation tree. A little piece of that tree was planted at Booker T. Elementary school. So the big famous tree that everyone knows, has a little sibling that grew up on my elementary school, right in front of it, too. I didn't know that history growing up, but now, I think it plays a more important role in the community because people know it as that. Huntington High School, where I went over grades 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12, there was no middle school back in those days, and all Black

high school as well, named after Carlos B Huntington who founded the Newport News shipyard. The Newport News shipyard is where they build all these massive ships and things like that. You can find warships, you'll find cargo ships, you find aircraft carriers, all kinds of things are built at the shipyard. It's literally right down the street, maybe a mile or so away because we sit right on the James River, right by the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay as it goes out to the Atlantic Ocean. There's a lot of water here, deep water here, so the shipyard was a place where almost everybody could go and find a job. So people were working, people were busy. School was a way, school was a thing that everybody did as far as I knew.

LAREMONT: So what were your experiences like at school? It seems like your teachers were very influential in your experience.

ARMSTRONG: I was one of those kids that really liked school, [background noise interrupts briefly], I don't think I had to be pushed to do homework and stuff like that. I enjoyed the sports, I played football, and ran track. I enjoyed math, I still talk about physics a lot now because you can use physics to do so many things. I did pretty well in school, I guess. There were like 360 or so in my class and I graduated just outside the top ten. I think I was number 12 or something like that in my class. Then a good portion of the folks in my class went off to college and I had a classmate who went off to Yale, and Brandeis, and just all kinds of places and stuff like that, one graduated my high school and went into the movies, and so you've seen his face and different movies and stuff like that. So we were busy in school, we just did a lot of stuff. I was lucky enough to be in the National Honor Society and the teacher that headed up the National Honor Society for us was the person that told me about Dartmouth. So you go to school all day, you come home, you do your chores, you try to get outside and have some fun. I worked in my dad's barber shop on weekends, on Saturdays anyway, to earn a dollar or two to put into my pocket. That gave me a chance to learn a little bit about what banking is and so forth, was all about. And I lived in what was then called thriving Black neighborhood, lots of Black businesses and so forth, a lot of which has just been pushed aside. So you don't see that now when you walk in the

neighborhood at all. But it was a, I think, I enjoyed it, as I look back on it. I really did enjoy it.

LAREMONT: And then, how did you settle on Dartmouth? How did you find out about it? Or did you come up and visit before applying?

ARMSTRONG: A teacher of mine, again, the faculty was all Black as well, but a teacher in my school went to some kind of a program up on campus during the summer between my junior and senior year in high school. She came back and said, "Nelson, I know the school that you gotta go to. You gotta go to Dartmouth." I had no idea what school she was talking about. I didn't know nothing about Dartmouth. And the moment I found out it was in New Hampshire, no way in the world, you know what I mean, because all I know about New Hampshire is how cold it is. But as I learned more and more about it and her gentle nudging made me apply and I like math, I actually thought that when I went off to college I was going to major in math. Mom and dad made no secret about the fact that you were going to go to college. It wasn't like oh let me think about it, nothing like that. Mom and dad, they expected you to go, so you gotta kind of work hard in high school because you're going to go off to college. But it was Hampton University, I thought I might really attend, but this teacher made me think a little bit more broad. She pushed me to apply to Dartmouth, but I started to think about Duke, to think about other schools and so forth, that weren't so local that I might have thought were beyond my reach a little bit. Before her influences caused me to look at other things, and when I applied to Dartmouth, the people started talking about this Ivy League school. And I learned a little bit more about it, I got a little bit more excited. The thing that really got me, though, was the interview, because the alums that I sat down with and had a conversation with, made me feel as though I wanted to be like them. So I really started to hope that Dartmouth was going to be a place I could go to and by luck, or by blessing, or by whatever, I got admitted. In fact, I was so excited when I got the admissions letter, I left school early to come home, I didn't think I was feeling well that day. I got that letter, jumped up and down, turned around and ran back to my high school to show that letter to my guidance counselor. And my guidance counselor was probably as excited as I was. And then it was a matter of how

in the world can we afford to go to school like that because Dartmouth cost a whopping \$3,800. Who could come up with that kind of money to go to school? Back in that day, that was pretty huge. Luckily, financial aid made it possible.

LAREMONT: That's amazing, what was the name of this teacher who so strongly convinced you to come to Dartmouth?

ARMSTRONG: Her name is Mamie Bacote. She passed away just a couple of years ago. After teaching high school, she got involved in state government, she became a delegate in the Virginia Commonwealth state government [phone rings in background]. Just a wonderful, wonderful young lady, and I was able to see her whenever I came home and give her some thanks, because she opened up the world in ways that I just never would have thought of on my own.

LAREMONT: And what do you think was so special about your interviewers that really convinced you to come to Dartmouth?

ARMSTRONG: They were guys that looked, what I thought, was successful. They came to the interview dressed in suits and ties. They had wonderful conversations between themselves, not only when they were talking to me. They made me feel like they wanted me to go to Dartmouth. They lived in the place that I went to do the interview, it was not a part of town that I would normally be hanging around and nothing like that, so the look of success, the look of doing well, the look of you can do this, the sense of yeah, we think that you're somebody that could be amongst us and all that kind of thing, just kind of gave me hope, and I said to myself, wow, I like to be like that someday. Now I don't know that I haven't turned into what they're all about, but, I am blessed to be the President of the Dartmouth Club right now.

LAREMONT: So when you eventually came up to Dartmouth for your freshman fall what were your first impressions?

ARMSTRONG: Oh wow, now, I got admitted sight unseen, I didn't go to Hanover and visit or nothing like that. That wasn't something my family could pull off. And we left here, my dad, two of his friends, and I left here

to drive there at about four o'clock in the morning. And it took 12 hours, 12 and a half hours to drive, so it was about 4:30 in the afternoon on September 17th, 1967 when we arrived, so the campus was just beautiful when you think of what campuses look like, but we didn't see anybody that look like me. So that was a little bit to deal with, when we found my dormitory and all that kind of stuff and walked around just a little bit, we still didn't see anybody that looked like me and by the time we have gotten a couple of things into my room, my dad and his friends were going to go check into a motel for the night. I said, "Dad I'm going with you," and I did. I didn't stay in that dorm, my dorm was North Topliff Hall. I spent a night with him, got up the next morning and went back to campus. It was about 9:15, 9:30 in the morning when we got back to campus, I got out of the car, the three of them didn't get out of the car because they got a 12-and-a-half-hour drive in front of them. So they had to go, so I can remember kind of like standing out on the sidewalk in front of North Topliff and the car pulled off, and now I got to go in this dorm and I don't know a soul, I don't know campus. I don't know much of anything. I go into the room, I unpack as best I can, and now I know I gotta go walk around on this campus and try to meet somebody. I have a freshman advisor, but I don't know who that person is yet. I only know the folks on the floor, so you walk around a little bit, you meet one or two people, and you do your best to settle in. You're a little bit nervous, no, let me take that back, little bit scared, because you're in a place where you know nothing and you're not bumping into people that look like you. You got to find your way around and do the best you can, luckily I've been on college campuses before because, like I said, Hampton University, it was close by, and I have a brother, who was two years older than me who had gone off to college the year before and I've been on his campus. I've a sister who everybody thinks I'm a twin. She's the one that lives here in this house. She went to Virginia State College, so I go with her to help take some of her things there when she went off to college, a few weeks before I did, so being on a college campus wasn't that spectacular, whatever, but I never been that far away from home. Again, I'm walking in spaces I don't know much about. Dartmouth is a great place but it's not the friendliest place in the world, when you compare it with the neighborhood that I came from, so you take a deep breath, take one step at a time,

and you go. But a couple of things happened pretty early that made it okay. I tried to join the football team, I made a freshman football team. And that's where I finally saw a face that looked a little bit like mine. I bumped into another young man who's a first year student, at Dartmouth is all male so and not looking at any women at all. I bumped into a young brother from Chicago, his name is Anthony Harley, and it was so good to see him that I ran up to him and he was so glad to see me that we almost didn't speak for the first 10-15 seconds, we were so glad to see each other, and he was just walking down the street, when I saw him. I went to the financial aid office, trying to get myself settled, and a young man who worked in the financial aid office was very kind and helped me out with everything that I needed help with. But towards the end of our conversation, he kind of stood up and looked at the shoes that I had on and he said, "Are those your winter shoes?" And I said, "yeah," he said, "you're going to need more than those," so he gave me an extra bit of money and said, "you might want to go downtown and buy yourself some winter shoes, it'll get you through the winter up here." I'll never forget that man, because he did that, without anybody asking him to do it, knowing that I wouldn't have known what to do on my own. So that's just what about Dartmouth that made me feel pretty good about the place. And then I bumped into the president of the College one day on The Green. We were watching the softball game, and a guy hit the ball and the president of the College called me by my nickname. Everybody in Dartmouth knows me as "Nels," Nelson wouldn't be something everybody would know, what anybody would know, because Nels is the only name I've ever used up there. But the president called me by that name, but how in the world did he know that name? Is a wonder -- that's not the name that was in a freshman book or anything like that, Nels, is a nickname the football coach gave me, and I just arrived on campus and then football coach gave me that name, yet the president somehow called me by that name. That made me think Dartmouth must be a really kind of special place. Those two incidents really made a difference for me and trying to get to know Dartmouth. It helped me open up. I'm shy, by nature, but Dartmouth helped me be a little bit more outgoing.

LAREMONT: These experiences -- they seem like they helped your transition. What would you say, how was your community experience like at Dartmouth versus your community Newport News, Virginia?

ARMSTRONG: In Newport News, I don't think I ever had much of a worry about going anywhere or feeling comfortable, or any of that kind of stuff, at Dartmouth, outside of the guys that were on my floor during my freshman year, I'm not so sure I ventured out a great deal. The guys on the floor were friendly, accommodating, and all of that, but it's still a brand new place. You're still 500 miles from home and Dartmouth was the kind of place that people didn't take you here and there, and show you all kinds of stuff. If I kind of didn't get out and do it on my own, I don't know how it would have been done. My advisors were good people but they didn't say, let me show you the ropes, or let me tell you this, or let me tell you that. If you got a question, they answered it for you, but it was really kind of like I felt as if I don't find a way to do this on my own, is not going to happen. And I learned that professors were taking some students home for dinner, and all that kind of stuff. That wasn't happening with me. No professor was inviting me home or taking me to dinner and stuff like that, and a lot of guys knew each other either from their hometowns or whatever. I was the only one from my hometown, I didn't know anybody else that may have come from Newport News, Virginia. So I kind of told myself in my head, you better get out here and get to know this place because you're going to be here until November you can't go home and it ain't like you can buy a plane ticket online or it ain't like you can ride a bus 500 miles home for you get on and turn around and get back. So I came from a community where folks kind of come together to help each other out. My next door neighbors growing up, they all almost like family too but outside of that floor that I lived on in North Topliff, nobody was necessarily mean to me, but nobody was necessarily inviting either. So you get out there and you do the best you can do to get to know the place. My dad being a barber was a people person, though, and barbers, and bartenders, and priests, and people like that, they get to know everybody. So my dad taught me a few things to think about. He said, in all the offices that are there and so forth, see if you can get to know the people, today they would say, who are support staff. Because they know really what's going on, you know what I mean,

they know more than the people in the back office and all that kind of stuff, so I would sometimes go into an office just to say hello, and try to meet some folks. And that worked extremely well for me, I think, in the Dean's Office, because the deans control so much of what's going to happen. And so I took my dad's advice and tried to go meet some folks that way and that helped me out a lot.

LAREMONT: How would you say your experiences were in the classroom, or with your professors, or your other classmates?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah, my freshman year, academically, is probably the worst year of my life. Because I was still trying to figure out this whole "how you reach out" thing. And I don't think it would be honest to say I felt as though my classmates reached out to me in one way or another, and sometimes it felt as though when I was trying to reach out, it wasn't like people were pushing me away. It wasn't like people were being mean, but it's not like they were being inviting either. And you can see different groups starting to form, different folks becoming friends and so forth. I feel kind of isolated in that sense throughout most of my freshman year and I think my grades suffered because I was trying to figure things out more than I was trying to go to class and I went to class, but I think I was more worried about how do I make myself feel comfortable and fit in here and I didn't necessarily feel like a lot of folks are trying to help me. So my grades suffered in my freshman year. My second year, sophomore year, I thought my feet were on the ground. I had met a number of folks that look like me and I learned about the Afro-Am and that made a huge difference because, while the numbers were not large, there were people who look like me and people who felt a lot like I did, and it gave me a chance to exhale, relax, and just accept Dartmouth for what it was. And that shaped me to become whom I think, what Dartmouth would know, as Nels, helped shape who that person became. And in Newport News here, I can still walk the street, I can still feel comfortable, still say "hey" bunches of the folks that I know and all that kind of stuff. At Dartmouth, the campus and the community weren't necessarily the same. Even though it's a small little town, there may be 10,000 folks in Hanover if you take the College away. But the College kind of didn't interact with the community the way, I think, Black students may interact with the

community, because people who live in Hanover that didn't work for the college, they weren't professors or administrators, or something like that, you almost kind of didn't get to know. Maybe they work from the College because they worked in the dining hall or they worked in the dormitories or something of that nature. But they weren't celebrated or brought to life or nothing like that. And I think I was pretty lucky to get to know some of those people and that helped me put my feet on the ground as well. It wasn't like you were part of that community, you are part of Dartmouth as opposed to necessarily a part of Hanover. But I think for most of the world, you see Dartmouth and you see Hanover, the College and town, as just one piece, but the longer and longer and longer I stayed there, especially after I graduated and went to work, I learned that this is not necessarily the truth. The folks you would bump into at the gas station, or at the drugstore, and the supermarket, or the grocery store, aren't unnecessarily the same people you are going to run into on campus. And there was enough of a divide there, I thought, that I'd never seen before in a community. I think I had a chance to see the difference between the haves and have nots. I think you still, I don't know I haven't been, I haven't lived there in 10 years but there was still a sense of the College versus the townies. And I'd never known anything like that before. In the Black community in my first and second year, again, the numbers were really, really small. My class had the largest group of Black students that had ever come in, and I think there was something like 17 of us. I think the class before me had 12. And so I don't think there were a total of 50 of us on campus, I don't think so, I think the number was much smaller than that. When you got 3,500 students, it was so few of us you almost always glad to see somebody. And the Afro-American society was brand new so there was no Shabazz Hall or nothing like that. And when the group came together, and again, they were just starting, they try to meet in the lobby somewhere, some dorm, so you can sit down and have a conversation, and it was really the academic year 1968-69 that I think things really took off for the Afro-Am because it was given a space, what's known as the Nathan Lord House, and that's a story in itself. So there were places that you knew you could go and just run into folks and so forth in my freshman year. And that whole thing that he talked about in the dining hall, where you go in the

dining hall, and all the brothers in one place, that was really true back in those days. Because it gave you a sense of being able to exhale for a few minutes, and that was a necessary good.

LAREMONT: Yeah so you mentioned the Afro-Am society, what is this society? What are they about? You mentioned it's very helpful to yourself.

ARMSTRONG: Absolutely, I still cherish it today. And the person who was the president of the Afro-American society when I came was a guy named Forester Lee, we know him as Woody Lee, still a wonderful friend today. The Afro-American society was really a coming together of the Black students on campus into a student organization. And again, the numbers were really, really small. I know that legitimate place, if you will, to go sit, it was a place where you could go, you could talk about the politics of the day. You could talk about life on campus. You can talk about the academics that were going on, and who the professors were and stuff like that. But it provided a gathering situation, if you will, and the political side was most important because back in 1967, 1968, the political part of civil rights in this country was just blowing up, if you will, so I wouldn't say that the Afro-Am was built around the politics, even though it was a large part of it. I would say it was built around giving those guys that were here an opportunity to sit down together, if that was what they wanted to do. In fact, a little story that I love to tell is about a brother that we call Hutch, James Hutcherson, class of 1969. Sitting in my dorm room, 203 North Topliff Hall one day, one evening, as a matter of fact, there was a knock on the door. And Hutch is taller than I am, he is 6'1" or something like that I believe, and he's not the smallest guy in the world like me like me, you know we care a little size to us, I open the door and Hutch was standing there in the hall in my doorway and the position he was standing in blocked the light that was behind it, so I see this huge brother standing in the door, and he says, "hey Nels, you coming to the Afro-Am meeting?" and just that sight made me say, "yeah I'm coming" [laughter]. I wasn't going to say no, this guy standing in the doorway that way. But it opened a tremendous door in terms of me being able to be in the Afro-American society. I mentioned Woody Lee a few minutes ago, I sure hope one of the students is interviewing Woody Lee. He's a doctor down at Yale, a faculty

member down at Yale, and he just did a study that looked at the Black graduates on campus that goes all the way back to the beginning of the College coming up to maybe the 1950s or 60s, or something like that. That study is just tremendous and something I hope your class will take a look at. He did a lot of work that is in Rauner [Special Collections] Library right now that talks about who's who in the Black community at Dartmouth in olden days. You'll just find out about folks who did tremendous stuff that we never learned about while we were at Dartmouth. These people who did so much. I was shocked to learn about E. E. Just [Ernest Everett Just], I had never heard of E. E. Just while I was at Dartmouth, even though he was the valedictorian of the class of 1907. Even though till this day, he's known as the father of modern biology, just this a STEM, he just posted STEM, I mean just valedictorian of this secondary academy, just all kinds of stuff. Never heard of the guy while I was at school, he was the NAACP spin guard original award winner. Never heard of this guy, while I was in school. So the Afro-Am was a beginning, for me, and maybe for a number of others, to learn about a Dartmouth history that we didn't know, which is what I'm hoping these interviews will add to.

LAREMONT: Yeah, I think I know we mentioned this as well in our pre-interview on October 21, but it's very important to bring to light these other accomplishments. Because they should be celebrated and definitely talked about more.

ARMSTRONG: Right, right. Now the Afro-Am and when you talk about the Afro-Am, I think people talk more about the fact that it was known for the Shockley incident. There was a physicist named, I think his first name is James Shockley [William B. Shockley], or something like that, who came to the campus and the Afro-Am gave him a standing ovation. The purpose of standing ovation was actually to keep him from speaking because the longer he stood at the podium, the more folks clapped, for they wouldn't stop until he sat down. So when people talk about the Afro-Am at the college, all too often they talk about things that cause the Am to have to look as though is just politically wow -- just you know anti this, anti that, just like a talk about the Black Panthers, but the reality is really something different, I think, it includes a strong political feeling. But

it was really more about how can we develop communities that we can build upon, that we can learn from each other, that we can add to each other's existence and add to each other's experience, while being on a campus like Dartmouth. It was also a time where, I mean, these problems that were on campus when I was there, I'm not trying to put myself in the class of this, but these guys were bright. You know, a '19, there was a Rhodes scholar who came out of the class, I think 1968 or 1969. Bill McCurine '68, I think, there was a Rhodes scholar that came out of my class, Willie Bogan, who played professional football and all that kind of stuff as well, so very, very successful really on the west coast. There's a Rhodes scholar that came out of class in 1972, one right behind mine, Jesse Spikes, he ran for Mayor of Atlanta some years ago. Just some brothers who were just absolutely outstanding academically, absolutely outstanding in terms of their characters and all that kind of stuff and I don't remember the College bragging about the fact that they had three Rhodes scholars in just a matter of four years or so, four or five years, just little things like that I think the College ought to brag about that it doesn't. And that's not just true when it comes to African Americans, I think the college doesn't brag about itself enough anyway, but it certainly should brag about what it was able to do. There was this guy named Caleb Watt. Caleb Watt. And I've never heard the College talk about that, but if you read the College's history, you'll know that Caleb Watt was the first Black person to take a course at dear old Dartmouth. But if you're not reading somewhere in the back row of an old book with dust on it, you don't get to learn stuff like that, because Dartmouth doesn't brag about the tremendously wonderful history that it has.

LAREMONT: How do you spell his last name? Watt?

ARMSTRONG: W-A-T-T. Watt. C-A-L-E-B. Caleb Watt.

LAREMONT: Okay, what do you think: I know there was you and about 17 other Black males in the class of 71, what do you think were some of the struggles or issues that you or your other Black classmates may have encountered in your time?

ARMSTRONG:

Yeah, first and foremost, I think, just adjusting to the place. I don't know how many of the group had a chance to come on campus before getting there as a first year student, and we had come from different parts of the country. And I don't know if others had a chance to meet someone who had gone to Dartmouth that was African American as well before they went to campus. I met an African American man who graduated in the class of 1934. But I didn't meet him until after I had been admitted and had come to Dartmouth, I think I was still in my first year when I met him. 1934 and here I am, in a class of 1971, but I had not known that he had gone to Dartmouth before then. My dad was a barber, like I said, and my dad knew him because of the barbershop but my dad hadn't known he had gone to Dartmouth or any of that kind of stuff. So maybe adjustment because it's a new kind of place, it's a different kind of winter than anything I had had, maybe some of the guys from Chicago [IL] or Cleveland [OH] knew some stuff about some bad winters but those guys who were coming from California or Texas or different parts in the South and so forth, just adjusting to the weather was something you had to deal with, because if you look at The Green, for example, nowadays in the winter they carve out space and you just walk right across The Green. When I was a student, they had boards that they had to put down for you to walk across The Green because the snow would be so high, would be so muddy, and so wet, they weren't able to make the paths to go through The Green way back then, and it would be so cold, couldn't recognize anybody because everybody was bundle up to cover everything you cover up. So, again, I think adjustment was part of what was different back then, because there were so few people. And, as the country was going through this civil awakening, if you will, "what does it mean to be Black?" Because I come from a Black neighborhood where all kinds of, well everybody was Black and all kinds of professionals and so forth were all Black, and now I get into a place where you don't see anybody that's anything. I don't know that everybody came from a situation like that, but the whole Black movement, if you will, talked about how tough you could be sometimes. So now you got the guys from Boston trying to show the guys from New York, traditional guys from New York, from Chicago who's tough and who ain't. So that wasn't friction necessarily, but it was rubbing some heads and stuff within the

community itself. There was, “how do we learn from each other? And what do we learn from each other?” and it's not like some of the fraternities where they have some of the tests that they could hand off to a new person coming into that fraternity, it was all brand new so everything that you were learning, you want to be able to share. Who are the professors that you need to get to know? Some folks did well, some folks didn't do that well, but all that was trying to create a community that had no real history to fall back on. So the Nathan Lord House, which is what I've mentioned a little bit before, was a gathering place where folks could come in. You could play [inaudible], or you could have a political discussion about what was new, or you could find out where the women colleges are and how the heck do you get there. Because we didn't have cars and all that kind of stuff, so everything, in that sense, was really brand new and you're trying to build on that. There wasn't a history that you can fall back on. That, I think, was really tough. And we knew each other more by nicknames than by real names. Again, Nelson Armstrong, I don't know that many people knew that was my name. Nels Armstrong, almost, to this day, I think, folks know Nels Armstrong. There were some wonderful nicknames that people had. And I don't know that I know full names of some of those folks to this day, another nickname. So the community was so small. But trying to come together, trying to deal with the whole place was all about, to deal with the newness of a place that lived on tradition. Even to this day, Dartmouth talks about tradition and that hasn't changed a bit, so the newness of it all, trying to fit into that tradition, trying to create a tradition of some kind because [inaudible] we knew it was all male. So the consequences of all that intersection was at play all at one time.

I saw a young man coming from Africa, how would he fit into that? Because he looks just like us, and he is just like us, but he's not like us. Because he's from Africa, he's not from the United States and Afro American implies you are from the United States. Luckily, most of us got along very well. But it was still the intersectionality of all of that happening at one time and being brand new.

LAREMONT: You mention the Black community, did you join any other communities or extracurriculars on campus like Greek Life, or anything else?

ARMSTRONG: No, Greek life, I was lucky enough to see some of it. But I wasn't prepared to become a part of it. Because I was really concerned about what they were all about, because that's the party scene, and I know my mom and dad want to see some grades. I better find a way to settle down and all that kind of stuff, and I didn't see a lot of participation of Black folks in the fraternity. So I didn't get pulled in that direction, so football was a way that I learned about a lot of other folks. And the Afro-Am was a place where I thought I could exhale. So I didn't try to branch out much more than that in my first year. I thought I'd better get my feet put on the ground. But there was a guy named Thomas Parker and he was in a class of '69. He's a Black man, he's from Norfolk, Virginia, which is maybe 20 miles from me. I didn't know him before I went to Dartmouth, and I got to know him because he had a band. And the name of his band, this is back then, the name of his band was "Uncle Tom's Cabinet" and it played soul music. He wrote some of the music himself, it covered a lot of popular songs and all that good stuff. And I heard him play a couple of times and towards the end of my first year, the young man that was playing drums in that band had to go off campus, for whatever reason, and they had a gig coming up inside of one of the fraternities. And I said "I play drums," and they let me play the drums. It was just amazing, so I got to sit in fraternities and see what was going on, playing the drums, earned a couple dollars to put in my pocket. And it was towards the end of the year, and the lead singer, there was one guy singing, he was a senior graduating, so I told them "I'll sing for you." So when I came back in my sophomore year, I became the lead singer for that band. We recorded a 45 in Spaulding Auditorium, we played in many, many of the fraternities on campus, we played on college campuses in different parts of New England and so forth. And that was what gave me a chance to learn more about Dartmouth inside the fraternity scene or other student organizations who were trying to have a party of one kind or another. I met some of the guys who played in other bands and so forth. I was a music major so music always was important to me. That was how, I think, I got to know

campus better than anything else. But I didn't reach out to join other clubs and so forth, I just kind of never felt that comfortable and that sense of being a little bit uncomfortable stayed with me all four years. One of my regrets at Dartmouth is that I never took an off-campus program. I never took any kind of international travel, while I was a student at Dartmouth. Because in some ways, even after I graduated, I was still kind of looking over my shoulder just a little bit. And that spurred me on again to this whole "Nels" thing, because one thing I thought I wanted to work very, very hard at and it continued throughout my career even before I was working, was I wanted to make the atmosphere a little bit better. Make it a little bit more open, make it a little bit more inviting, be a little bit easier for the different sides, not just two, but the many, talk to each other and sit down at the same table. So that band gave me a chance to reach out in ways that I don't think I could have done, in a club. I don't know that I would have felt that comfortable.

LAREMONT: That's very interesting. I noticed, also, in some of your records in Rauner [Special Collections] Library that you were a student recruiter as well. Can you tell me a little bit about your experience doing that?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah, one of the things that I think Dartmouth did well, not as a college, or not because of an institutional policy that caused the Admissions Office to do one thing or another, but through the Tucker Foundation [William Jewett Tucker Center], which has played a huge role, in my opinion, that again, you don't hear very much about today, opening the world up for the Black students that went to Dartmouth. I think through the Tucker Foundation [William Jewett Tucker Center], a number of people, students, Black students, were able to get out and go visit high schools that Dartmouth wouldn't have visited otherwise. If anyone came to my high school from Dartmouth, while I was in high school, I never heard of it. I don't think my guidance counselors assigned anyone to come from Dartmouth, but, through the Tucker Foundation [William Jewett Tucker Center], Dartmouth sent a number of brothers out to go into cities and to schools, Black schools, to recruit. To go in and talk to young brothers, at that time, about coming to Dartmouth. I feel very proud that the State Attorney

General, here in the city of Newport News, is a Black man, is a Dartmouth Grad that I recruited. And in different places across the nation there's a group that I Zoom with quite a bit there, and I'm sure some of those guys will be doing some of these oral interviews, who talked about how they were recruited by one or another brother from Dartmouth. So to be able to come home, and there were what, three Black high schools, when I was going to school, to be able to come home and go into those schools as a student from Dartmouth was pretty unique. Wasn't a whole lot of that happening, and Dartmouth made that happen again. Not necessarily through the Admissions Office. I don't want to give them credit for what I think they didn't do, but I think it was the Tucker Foundation that really opened things up, so that we could go out and do that. And to have somebody walk after into my high school that looks like you, that can talk about that experience that you can actually go and do and you won't be the first one, you'll find somebody else that's there, and that person believes you can do it, is a tremendous bit of support that I think many of us going into Dartmouth didn't have before we went to Dartmouth. So that sense of recruitment, I think, made a heck of a difference for Dartmouth, and you can see it, you can literally see it. Again, as a member of class 71, I think there were 17 of us. In the class of 72, there might have been 20 or something of us, and then in the class of 73, it gets to be about 100 of us. And that's because of that recruiting program that went out and helped find all these young men that were as qualified as anybody, but wouldn't have necessarily been recruited before then. That gave the number of Black men in first year class a chance to jump up really, really, really, really high. So the class of '73, '74, '75, there are good numbers of African American men because of students, like me, who went out to do that recruiting. I loved it. There were some guys who did a lot more than what I did, in recruiting, because their travel included a lot of stuff. Mine was basically, let me come home and do stuff nearby. There are a lot of guys who went all over everywhere to do recruiting, and they did a fantastic job.

LAREMONT: It sounds like these visits were really successful. So what is the Tucker Foundation [William Jewett Tucker Center]? Or how did this program get organized and come together?

ARMSTRONG: With Tucker Foundation [William Jewett Tucker Center], I don't know that it has the same visibility today that it had back in olden days, right next to Thayer Hall, kind of back behind Thayer Hall is where the Tucker Foundation [William Jewett Tucker Center] was housed I don't know where it might be housed today. But it was sort of the spiritual arm of the campus, if you would. And it brought programs that gave students an opportunity to do some type of off-campus work be it academic, be it go into a community that may have needed some help, or to do something that was away from Dartmouth, typically inside the nation as opposed to an international program or something like that. But it was headed up by a dean, not an academic dean, but an administrative dean that worked on programs that gave students opportunities outside of the classroom. So it could be religious opportunities, if you would, because it opened doors, I think, for Jewish students that might not have been there before. For Islamic students that might not have been there before, a non-academic program created student opportunities that might not have existed in the student organization already. And the deans for that program were just instrumental, I think, in making things possible for students. Under that umbrella, you found things like the ABC program, called A Better Chance. ABC's headquarters is down in New York, but a great deal of what happened from ABC came out of Hanover because the Tucker Foundation [William Jewett Tucker Center], I think, was the bedrock of how ABC did a lot of things. The dean from there is what created a whole lot of things. When you look at John Rassias, who was out of the French Department. And I can't think of the name of the program I'm trying to say, but he created the language program that helps people from all kinds of schools go into foreign countries and be able to speak that language very, very quickly. The Tucker Foundation [William Jewett Tucker Center] was how all of that got started. So it's just a little program, in a little building set behind Mass[achusetts] Row. That the Tucker Foundation [William Jewett Tucker Center] lived in, operated out of, and created opportunities for.

LAREMONT: Where did the funds come for these travels and overnight visits? And how did you decide which schools or which states you went to?

ARMSTRONG: That's a good question, I think the College funded it for the most part. I think the Tucker Foundation [William Jewett Tucker Center] went out and talked to alumni as well, so there were some programs that alumni funded, that the Tucker Foundation [William Jewett Tucker Center] created the opportunity for. There was a program called Foundation Years, just a fantastic program, something that the whole country should have been doing. I know it was primarily funded by an alum out of Chicago. Not a Black alum, but a well-to-do alum from Chicago who made it possible for some students to come out of Chicago, who hadn't even graduated from high school, or who may have just stepped out of jail, but came to Dartmouth and graduated. Some 25, 26 students actively participating in that program, and 10, 11, 12, 13 of them went through the whole course, graduating just like everybody else. So funding would have come mostly from the College, I think, but some individual funding from individual alumni paved the way for a lot of it to get started. I think after it was started, the College hung in there for a few years, but that funding started to dry up. And as it dried up, I think you saw less, and less, and less coming out of the Tucker Foundation [William Jewett Tucker Center]. The College foot the bill for a lot of it.

Alumni giving has always been instrumental in the college's success. For Black programs, I think, no College has had a history, prominence is still true, no college has had the history of alumni participation that Dartmouth has. By the time you're looking at the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and before, the number of alumni, the percentage of alumni giving to like the alumni fund in the college, was the highest at Dartmouth than any place, you can name. So alumni loyalty, you can talk about Harvard, you can talk about Yale, you can talk about any school, alumni loyalty at Dartmouth -- I'm not saying this just because I was the director of alumni relations -- this too long before I got there, alumni loyalty at Dartmouth was the envy of all schools.

LAREMONT: I know after college, you've been working with the College for quite a number of years. So after you graduated, you worked as an advisor, right, for the Afro American society and, as a counselor, how did you get these jobs, straight after graduation?

ARMSTRONG: I was lucky enough to follow in the footsteps of others. There were students who graduated and then worked for the College, and one way or another, before I did. It wasn't a first in any way, but again, out of the Dean's Office, there is a familiar guy named Dean Schaefer, a guy named Dean Ralph Manuel, and some others who I thought had some very strong and very good opinions of how we can bring others into the family in better ways than had happened before. So there was what was called a Counseling Office, kind of an adjunct to the Dean's Office, that brought in an African American person, a Native American person, and they gave us offices in the same building that that Tucker Foundation [William Jewett Tucker Center] was in as opposed to in the actual Dean's Office itself. As a counselor you would reach out to, for me, mostly African American students to help them with their adjustment to the College, help them as they thought about academic situations: How do I better mind study skills? Who do I need to get to know to help me build a foundation to help me be successful at Dartmouth? They gave a number of us an opportunity to do that. And I finished my course load one term early, so spring term of my senior year, I got to be a student doing an internship in the Counseling Office, because it gave me three more credits and I'd already finished my major and all that kind of stuff. That way I didn't have any courses that I had to take, I had the entire term to work as an intern in that office and the people that were working in that office at the end of my senior year, they left, so there's an opening there and Dean Schaefer and Dean Manuel were kind enough to say "Nels, you want this job?" And I said, "heck yeah," so I was able to work in that job for three years and again, it's kinda an adjunct to the Dean's Office. You're not a dean in any way but you're trying to reach out to students very much like a dean would and help provide support. So I developed a program, as a counselor, that a number of people across the nation thought was pretty good, talked about it, presented it at national conferences and stuff like that, it was called the Nel's Lunch Program. It actually got started because I was hungry. Sometimes

Black students will come and talk to me because I was in that office, and you know a lot of people to talk to and for a stretch of about a week and a half, somebody would be in my office every day at noon, so I didn't get to go eat lunch because they had concerns, and so forth, I'm trying to be helpful with those concerns and one day, I was hungry and I said, "I'm going to lunch," so the student that was with me, I said, "come on, let's go to lunch." And I started to do that almost every day, and it turned into a program that I would advise students to come "let's go have lunch," because in that regard, one of the things that everybody does is eat. So during that lunch, I could talk about almost anything: what are you going to do for a summer job? What alums do you know that live in your hometown? Doesn't matter what they look like. What kind of thing do you think you want to do after you graduate? And that conversation was so much easier with students at lunch, than it might be in the office. And so, when students would hear Nels will take you out to lunch, they want to come to go to lunch. So I had a captive audience in talking about what do you do, how you take advantage of dear old Dartmouth, which is what the Counseling Office was really all about anyway. How you adjust to the campus, how you adjust to the academics. I just wanted to take it to what do you do when you're not at Dartmouth, at a summer job, that job later on, how do I introduce you to alumni, and stuff like that. So the program kinda accidentally grew out of that, and I use that program all throughout the rest of my career in higher education being at Dartmouth. I did work at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] for about 10 years, I had to do Nel's Lunch Program there, and I did it at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, I did the Nel's Lunch Program there. I worked at Dartmouth three separate times, I did the Nel's Lunch Program on all of those separate occasions. So the word kinda got out about it, it grew at Dartmouth, more and more and more, so there's a thing called CASE. The Council for the Advancement and Support of Education, out of Washington D.C. I reported on the Nel's Lunch Program at two separate CASE meetings. I talked about it at a CASE meeting all the way in Wales [U.K.], on the other side of the ocean, because other administrators want to know: How does it work? How does it help your students? And students across the board, not just Black students, it worked one of it because everybody wants to eat. For a

student, free lunch in the Hanover region or downtown at a restaurant or something like that, I think they kind of saw the fun that was in it. I kinda saw that I got this captive audience that I could talk to folks. And out of that, I know a number of people that got summer jobs, I know a number of people that got full time jobs, and I know a number of people that I got introduced to networks. I think a number of people learn the value of what a Dartmouth Club could be, I think a lot of Dartmouth clubs cut something out of it, so the Nel's Lunch Program fed me, fed a lot of students, I think helped the college.

LAREMONT: That's amazing, it sounds like this program and you were really helpful to all these students. Why did you decide to stay at Dartmouth and keep going forth with these programs? And you kept coming back, came back three times, what kept drawing you back to Dartmouth?

ARMSTRONG: You want to pay back some of what you've been lucky enough to have, and I think Dartmouth gave me a platform, if you will, gave me a sense of confidence that I might not have been able to display otherwise. It gave me a chance to meet all kinds of people I never would have met, and introduced me to ways of making a difference. And I think we all want to find ways to make a difference in the world. And Dartmouth, I think, gave me that. There were people like Charlie Simmons, class of '64, Black man who didn't have a chance to come out till he got admitted, his family just couldn't afford it. But he was in that Counseling Office when I first started, so I learned so much from him about how you can give something back. I know the sense of looking over your shoulder when you're in a brand new environment. I wanted to see if I can help somebody not have to go through that the way I went through it. And the College needed resources, I thought, to help make that happen. Because as much as I love Dartmouth College, I didn't like Dartmouth College because of having to go through that. People helped me through it, so I thought if I could help others through it, all the better. And I would give it all the energy I could give it to help make it happen. I talked about the fact that some students got invited out to professor's homes, white students, they got invited out to professor's homes for dinners, and they felt at home, they felt part

of the community and so forth. Well, I wanted folks that look like me to have that too, so by working there, I could provide some of that. So my own house became what was called the Nel's Inn [laughter]. It was a place where you could get off campus and do your laundry if you wanted to. Or you could come sit down and watch TV for a few minutes if you wanted to. Or you could come in and eat at my house if you wanted to. Or alums coming back, you know, not everybody could afford to stay at the Hanover Inn, so you know, lucky enough I had a house big enough so folks could come and spend the night if they needed to. And it's close enough to campus if you don't have a car, you can walk if you want to. Just being able to provide something like that, because for many folks, coming to Dartmouth you're going to school but if you're in a place you've never been before, not that many people look like you, Dartmouth is not 9-5, when 5 o'clock gets here and everybody goes home, you still kind of like by yourself. You need some other folks that are there. You need somebody that can say, "well you know Walmart right over here, I got a car, I take you to Walmart." There just weren't a whole lot of people, and, in my opinion, they're still aren't enough people who look like me, or they look like somebody else but that somebody else looks like you, whatever it is, that helps you exhale just a little bit. And, the best way I thought to do that, was to work at Dartmouth and get a full time job doing something that the College needed. So I worked in the Alumni Fund Office. The College is all about raising funds, the College is all about nourishing the alumni relations, so I wanted to do that kind of thing. And under the guise of that, you can do Nel's Lunch. You could do that data for folks who needed it, you can help them understand where the stores were, what community was all about, how you get somewhere. You can help them know if you really gotta go to Boston, here's the way to do it. While making a difference, I hope, inside the office in the Alumni Fund or whatever. In the Alumni Relations Office, there was only one Alumni Relations Officer who was a director that looked like me, before me. It was a young lady, Etna [unknown name], and the University of Pennsylvania. They had a Black director before me. So I became the second Black director of an Alumni Relations Office in the Ivy League, everybody would ask me a lot of times on campus, when I will be traveling, "oh so you wrote all the Black stuff in Alumni Relations, you run the

minority stuff.” It was important to be able to say, “no I’m the director of the office,” you know what I mean. In a sense, I directed all. So, to have somebody be able to do all of it, but under that guise, still be able to pay attention to: how do you make folks that look like me feel more comfortable, more supported, you help them get inside and network, and all that kind of stuff, became extremely important. Because you’re not just doing that for students. You’re trying to have an effect on the faculty and administration in the same way. So it’s nice for them to be able to point and say “look, we do have a person of color sitting over here.” But you can’t just stop it right there. You got to affect those folks because what needs to happen needs to happen, whether you’re there or not. So those things made me come home a second time, and then made me come home a third time. There’s a wonderful, wonderful, wonderful lady that worked at Dartmouth, a white woman [Linda Barton]. And she was just marvelous, I think, in a way, in the advancement area, and that would be Alumni Relations, Alumni Giving Development and public relations. She did a lot of the hiring and research and how you bring people in, and so forth, at Dartmouth, she was white, but she worked really, really hard to bring minority people in. And people like that, support you and what you’re trying to do, and make the world that much better, I think, across the board. So I appreciate those folks and what they did. I wanted to make sure that I worked hard so their work made a difference too. So all that made Dartmouth home. And the whole idea of saying welcome home, is all about saying to everybody, because if you can say it to everybody and get everybody to buy into it, then the people that I really want to buy in to it see it too. It becomes a part of the whole. That’s what I hope anyway. I was trying to do.

LAREMONT: You mentioned your work with the Alumni Fund, do you know where some of those funds were allocated to? Like did any go towards students of color or recruiting Black students?

ARMSTRONG: I sure hope so, when you’re bringing money in through the Alumni Fund, I wasn’t one that went out and did individual solicitations. My job in the Alumni Fund Office gave me a chance to oversee, monitor, and support, if you will, ten alumni classes. So ten classes were assigned to me, and I worked with the leadership of those

classes to increase their money that they brought in for their class dues, for the information to go into the magazine, for any specific things that they wanted to do. So I got a chance in reunions, or homecoming, or travel out and visit with class leadership, and so forth, to help raise those monies. Those monies, once raised, did in fact go into scholarships, they went to financial aid, they did go into various parts of the College and so forth, so not much of it was designated, if you will, to go like to the Afro-Am or the Native American Citizen Support. It was monies coming into the College. And I was always prepared to talk about why you should look at this or why you should look at that, but I didn't do individual solicitations that go to a specific place, if you will. It was how do we cause alumni to feel even better about the College than they do, and how do we say hello, and how do we nurture that association with you and the College so that you reach a little deeper in your pocket [laughter]. And enhance the College that much more. But, looking the way I do, and you working with a class that makes people who look like me, might be more inclined to give a dollar too. So every way that you can cause folks to feel better, no matter who they were, helps, even though I can keep in the back of my head the focus that I want the brothers and then the brothers and the sisters and then all of those who fell under the under minority umbrella, feel a little bit better about the College or giving to help each other. And it all kinda works, I think.

LAREMONT: Also at Dartmouth you are also the co-founder of the Black Alumni of Dartmouth Association [BADA], right, so what were you involved in? And why did you found it or how did you begin?

ARMSTRONG: This is another one of those things where I'm so proud to be a part of it, I don't know that I take any individual credit for it. There was so many folks in classes earlier than me going all the way back to the classes in the 40s, and guys from the 40s, and the 50s, and the 60s, who came together with meetings on campus or down in New York City. And I wish I could remember the name of the hotel that we would meet in, it was finally the hotel that Trump boy made famous and all that kind of stuff, but it had another name before that, and guys would come together and just talk about how do we support Black students on campus. And after a few years of

meeting, coming together and making statements and so forth, that group formalized what is known as the Black Alumni Association. I hope I was helpful because, by then, I was working for a College, when it actually was formalized, and I was only 22 years old at that time. In the class of 71, there were two members of the class of 71, who are co-founders too. I think two members of the class of 1972 were co-founders as well, but the vast majority were guys of classes of the 50s and the 60s. And the first president, I think, was in class 1948 even. So that group of guys, I think, sat down and did a lot of talking amongst each other and with the College and that came together to create that organization. And as far as I know, all the studies that I've done, continues to make me believe that it is the oldest Black alumni association at any predominantly white school in the nation. It was, again, an opportunity to say, to the young students that were there, "we got you." We're here for you. We want to be there when you're looking for a summer job. We want to be there when you're looking to learn more about what profession you want to be in. We want to be there as you try to climb that professional ladder, or that personal ladder, or something that you want to do. We want to be there for you. You don't have to feel like you're alone and you're not the first. We want to, we want to be somebody you can look at, we want to be somebody you can turn to. We want to be there to support you in any way we can. And so, talking to various administrators present on the campus and so forth, and John Kemeny, who was the President of Dartmouth then, who I think played a tremendous role in making Dartmouth coed and everything else good. He was willing to listen. And so that's what brought about. The numbers were still small, but those guys were smart. Those guys knew how to negotiate. I'm just lucky to be in the crowd.

LAREMONT: Do you think that all of your efforts and BADA were successful in helping current students to feel more comfortable?

ARMSTRONG: No [pause]. While I am very proud of the organization, while I think things have come a long way, I think we still hear people talk about the fact that while things have gotten better, we still have such a long way to go. BADA was officially organized and recognized by the College in 1972. We sit here October 27, 2021. And it was only

within the past year that African and African American studies was able to even say we can now take a giant step towards getting something going, because of a \$20 million gift that was given by alum, I'm very, very thankful for that gift. Because a Dartmouth couple, not a Dartmouth Black couple, but a Dartmouth couple made that \$20 million gift. That \$20 million gift is going to make things, going to make some things get a whole lot better. If you look at the number of Black faculty on campus, it is still small. If you look at the number of Black students on campus, it is still small. If you look at the number of Native American and other students who fall into the minority umbrella, there's still a lot of work to do, I think, to make folks feel comfortable and most of that work now, just as I think it was true back in the old days. And that's something that we need to do, something that people who don't look like us need to do, so how do we affect that change. How do we cause us people who look at what this stuff is all about and stop thinking, we got to bring you all up to our level. And actually learn to see that we kinda all in this together, how do we support each other, and make all of this good because it ain't about, and I've never thought being an African American student, or Black alum, or any of that stuff that I'm trying to reach up and get to be like them. I'm just trying to be able to take advantage of all of what's out here. I'm not asking you to open the door, so I can move up. I'm just saying open the door, give me a chance, I'll make it work. And all too often, I still believe that there's a huge crowd of people out there who are open to the idea that minority folks can move up as opposed to we're really all in this together. Sometimes you gotta learn how to get out of the way. And we haven't been able to cause, what some might want to call mainstream society, to learn how to get out the way because getting on the way might cause a whole ship to rise, as opposed to start thinking that people that are sitting over there can now come sit over here. So no in a sense that we still have a long way to go. Yes, in a sense that a lot has been accomplished, yes, absolutely. But this is a shame that, I think, we still have such a long way to go.

LAREMONT:

Yeah, so how long did you end up staying at Dartmouth? Did you retire after your time at Dartmouth?

ARMSTRONG: My first time working for the College was for three years from '71-74, and then left to go get a master's degree which I never did finish. And Dartmouth was kind enough to give me the fellowship to go get that degree with. I want to mention that too because Dartmouth has done a lot of good. But I went off to get this degree at William & Mary [University], didn't finish it, and then went to work at MIT and worked at MIT for about 10 years. And then Linda Barton, I mentioned, the young lady that works, Linda Barton, was kind enough to send a message out that Dartmouth was looking for some people to come work in the Alumni Fund Office, didn't say looking for Black people, just looking for people. Well, hey, that's my Alma mater, you know what I mean, I'm working in the Alumni Fund Office at MIT, lemme go do that at my alma mater. And I was lucky enough to get the job. And worked there for about three years. I enjoyed, I learned a lot, supported my Alma mater, and tried to bring folks in. And I was blessed one day to say to the hand in the back of my head, you know, you want to be a director. You don't want to be an associate director anymore. I'd been an associate director in different places, and so forth. You got to be a director because you need to have more of an impact on what's going on. And a young lady who's very good at Dartmouth, but graduated from Case Western Reserve, knew that Case Western Reserve was looking for a director in the Alumni Relations Office. And she said to that campus, "y'all should look at this guy," and they called me up on the phone. And I was lucky enough to get the job as Director of Alumni Relations out at Case Western Reserve. When I went out there, I think I learned a lot about leadership and all that kind of stuff. I stayed there for five years, and then a man that I hold dear, who's Director of Alumni Relations before me at Dartmouth, retired. And Dartmouth started looking for an Alumni Director. I thought I should throw my name in there, because it would do one thing for sure. It would get me interviewed, and that means I get to take a trip back to Dartmouth [laughter]. And luckily, there was a BADA conference that was happening at right about the same time, so I went to the BADA conference that was on campus, and the Vice President, who was looking for a new person to be in Alumni Relations, came to that BADA meeting. That BADA conference. And with him sitting in the audience, I said to myself, this is the right time to act like you're in an interview and I gave a

presentation. And I think he liked that presentation and he hired me. And it was another opportunity to do what I said, come back in a place that was visible, that made a difference across the board, but keep in mind what it is, I think, I want to try to do. So, that gave me an opportunity to come back for a third time, and in that time I stayed in the Alumni Relations for 12 years, and then was lucky enough to move into the President's Office for two years. So I've got a long spread of time that I worked on campus, and I think I made a lot of friends, and hopeful to say I did a pretty good job and all that kind of stuff. So in 2009, when the campus was trying to make some adjustments because of financial situations and so forth, they were trying to get a number of folks, who weren't quite 65, the eligibility to retire. And I had a number of years behind me, I had all the numbers that were right, that I could retire, even though I was only 59. So I took what was sometimes called a buyout, and I was able to retire pretty early and I came out. Hung around in Hanover for a couple of years though, with hopes that I could still have some ways of supporting the African-American community and so forth, before I came back here to Virginia. So, I got a lot of years in Hanover, I loved those years, I still hate the winter. But because of the Nel's Inn, I hope I was able to help a number of people come back to campus and visit. Not only because they were alumni, but because their own kids had gone to Dartmouth by then. Have a little bit of an effect on the community because I was able to join one or two things in the community. I hope, was trying to be helpful, to be visible in some way, because the numbers have just always been real, real, real, real small. In any way you can get out there and try to help out more.

LAREMONT: What do you think was the greatest struggle of your career at Dartmouth?

ARMSTRONG: Trying to be heard as a voice. Because I think that there are often situations where you are being heard as a Black voice. When your role, I think my role is bigger than that. A lot of times you're trying to say things and you want the Black community to hear it for sure, because you got things to say there. But the transition that's going to help the world get better is bigger than just the Black community, is everybody else trying to get white folks to hear what you're

saying and how it affects them. Not just, I'm telling you this because it helps the Black community, I'm actually trying to tell you this because it helps Dartmouth be better. That was always a struggle, I think, even after I graduated. And even after I retired, it still seems to me that if I'm in a conference or a Zoom conference, and President Hanlon is on the line, and I'm saying something, I ain't trying to tell you this, Phil, because I think it makes the Black community happy, I'm trying to say this because I think it makes Dartmouth better. And if it makes Dartmouth better, it automatically makes the Black community better. So, how do you get your voice to be heard, not just over here, but across the board, it really makes a difference across the board. That, I think, has been the biggest struggle for me. I know that there have been many times when sitting in a meeting, talking and speaking as the Director of Alumni Relations, folks wanted to hear it being about Black alumni. I know that I would get invited to go to conferences and speak on Black subjects, in fact, I opened a presentation one time pretending I was mad as hell. Talking about "why you guys keep inviting me to talk about Blacks subjects?" So I'm talking about alumni relations with any professional. I am the Director of Alumni Relations. Office of a big important school. I acted like I was mad as I could be, in the middle of it, I stopped. And said, "Now that's an example that I want to show you of what people can do more than just what you think they can do." That audience was flabbergasted. And at the end of it, so many of them came and said, "you know you're right. We learn so much from people who don't look like us, but then after that, we don't say any thoughts about something, because we categorize it and we put it over here." So that was, for me, a great frustration. That people could only hear it and categorize it, but wouldn't necessarily see it across the board. And what we all trying to do is try to grow and expand, and be better across the board. It's not about catching up. Yeah, there's some catching up to do, but it's about a great deal more than that. I want my daughter to live in a world, like all parents say, that's better than today. Well, it can't be that if we still put everything in just this category. There's so much good, there's so much knowledge, there's so many good things you can talk about anything. Talk about the traffic light and what Black people did to make traffic better. Talk about refrigeration and what it's done for the medical field, and then remember that it was a

brother that died because he couldn't get blood, when it was he that helped to figure out how to put blood in a controlled atmosphere, so that everybody could get blood, if you needed it. And he couldn't get blood in the hospital. Just all 8 million examples of how if all of us took the best that we can get from all of us, the place becomes better for all of us, so that remains a great frustration for me.

LAREMONT: I guess on the opposite side, then what would you say is the most rewarding part?

ARMSTRONG: Oh, the wonderful people I've met and have had a chance to be associated with. Like I said, I participated in a Zoom group every other week with some guys from the classes of '73, '74, '75, '76. And these are just some fantastic guys. I was with them down in San Juan, Puerto Rico, one time, and a meeting they were doing down there. And they were just sitting around a table, having breakfast, but they were having a business conversation about what's going on in global finances. How it was affecting America. How it was affecting the world, and so forth. You could have put that on TV and Harvard Business School would have wanted to use it as an example of a discussion and so forth. I mean it was a real high end discussion, and it was just guys sitting around over breakfast. So meeting people like that, who have the wherewithal to have a conversation that is expansive, that gives people knowledge. And then, you expand that to think about the people that I've had a chance to work with at Dartmouth. Because of Dartmouth, I've had exposure to all kinds of people. The President of the United States, leadership and government in foreign worlds, I've had a chance to travel throughout this country and many, many, many other countries as well. The Prime Minister of Norway came to Dartmouth, and when you're the Director of Alumni Relations, you get to meet all these people. Commencement brings in tremendous folks, so you get a chance to sit down and have dinner with them on the night before commencement. So I met everything from astronauts, to superstar sports people, Willie Mays and Hank Aaron, and all those kinds of baseball players, Billie Jean King. And I can just go on, and on, and on, and on, about the people that you have a chance to meet and sit down and talk to just on an everyday basis. I love golf, you know, and in the world of golf, there's a place

called St. Andrew, over in England. And it is like the home of golf throughout the whole world. And anybody that would ever have a chance to go there, would want to go, I would love to. Well, I was at a conference over in Wales, once, and I gave a presentation, and some of the people in the Alumni Relations Office from St. Andrews were there. And I guess they liked the presentation, because when they brought the President of St. Andrews, here, to the United States and had him tour around, he came to Dartmouth to sit down and talk to the President of Dartmouth. While I was so blessed that his alumni relations officer said, "you cannot go to Dartmouth and not sit down and meet Nels." And he came, the two of them, came to my office and sat down. And we had a great conversation about alumni relations, and all that kind of stuff, and he said to me, "you gotta come to St. Andrews and play golf on our golf course, please come as my guest." Now, I've never actually been able to do it, but had it not been for Dartmouth, I would have never been in that situation. So the people that you meet, the experiences that you have, that tiny little place in Hanover, New Hampshire, with an airport a little bit bigger than the gas station gives you an incredible experience. I wouldn't have missed that for the world.

LAREMONT: What have you been doing since retiring from Dartmouth?

ARMSTRONG: I've been, I like being busy, my sister said to me just today, "you're always busy, you're always doing something." I like being busy and I'm blessed to come from a Black family that did some pretty good things in the early days. I'm named after my great grandfather, Nelson Armstrong. He and a couple of his brothers participated in starting a Black bank in the 1920s. Something that can happen a lot in this country, and they bought a lot of land. So, there was a time when we owned maybe 200 acres of land, we still own about 100 of those acres. And for the past seven, eight years, I've managed a lot of that land. This is actually down in North Carolina, Wilson County, I live about three hours drive away from there. But, you know, if you try to run a Black farm, it is tough in this country, it always has been. So when I got involved, we will have some financial struggles and all that kind of stuff, and I was able, I think, to get us out of all that trouble you know, anybody and money anything, we still have revenue coming in. So that's a fair bit of time and energy trying to

start a couple of companies on my own, didn't do too well with that. I went to a Dartmouth Club meeting and I enjoyed meeting the guys there. It was so good to be back with the Club that got me started and all that. I unfortunately missed a meeting because I had to go up to Hanover for something, and having missed that meeting, when I came home, I somehow had been voted President, I don't know how that happened [laughter]. But I'm still the President of that club so we've been trying to put things together and make that happen. So that takes up a whole bunch of my time. In the community, sometimes people hear you went to Dartmouth, and they want to take advantage of so for a number of neighbors and other folks, you know, you'd be helpful, paperwork, and stuff they have to do with the city government, things that aren't going to well, you become a go-to person that they turn to. And sometimes people hear you went to Dartmouth, and they go the other way. "Who do you think you are?" So I've had some struggles with that as well. I've been able to become more active in my high school class. I'm not only 50 years out from Dartmouth, I'm 55 years out from my high school. So I got involved in some activities and stuff like that, but given a chance, I want to hit golf balls, I want to go fishing, I want to go out and take pictures. Those three things, I think, outside of my daughter, those three are things the love of my life.

LAREMONT: Wonderful, all right, is there anything else that you'd like to add?

ARMSTRONG: Well, just that to this day, I'm convinced that Dartmouth truly is unique. I think its' greatest asset is its' greatest liability, and that is location. But I hope folks won't take that location and just see the sense of being a lone place out in the middle of the wilderness. There's so much good that can happen in that little small space that I hope every student will take advantage of what that place has to offer, but I don't see Dartmouth offering it in the way that I wish it would. Therefore, it becomes incumbent upon the student that's there to reach out and grab every bit of what you can reach out and grab. Don't wait for your advisor. Don't wait for the students down the hall. Don't wait for your professors or anybody else to offer you something. If you see something and you think you might be interested in it, go after it. I asked all students at Dartmouth to do

three things, one: do something you've never done before. I did rock climbing. I wouldn't do it again, but I'm glad I did it because it gave me a sense of confidence of reaching outside of my comfort zone. Two: get to know the president. Because the president, no matter who she or he may be, have all kinds of networks and contacts that can become important, even though you might not know it. Some guys might want to ask the president, "you know a student that can do this?" and the president don't know you, you don't know the president, she or he can't make that connection. So do something you've never done before, get to know the president. And three: get to know the alumni wherever you live. I don't care where it is, there's Dartmouth alumni nearby somewhere, because that network, that connection, can give you some things that you just don't know. You want, need, can have, or whatever. So I hope everybody will take advantage of a place, and I mean that take advantage of the place [emphasized]. Don't wait for the place to give you advantages. Don't wait for all the wonderful things that if people may talk about the place, we have, don't wait for them to come to you. Because all too often they may not. Go get 'em, no matter what, just go get 'em. Keep asking, until you get what you want. Because somebody is gonna help you out. That's what I think at Dartmouth. Because if you cut us, we bleed green, so go get that green! Green means go, you know, green means life, green means money, green means Dartmouth. Go get it and make your life the best you can make it. Yes.

LAREMONT: That's great advice.

ARMSTRONG: Thank you. And thank you for doing what you're doing. Not only because Dartmouth's history needs to have, I think so much in it. But because you give, I hope, a number of people an opportunity to say something and share. I appreciate the fact that you've been kind enough to ask me to do this. I really, really, really do, and I suspect that brothers and sisters, like me, that students may be in touch with, will be happy to have the same opportunity. So I appreciate you doing this, I appreciate the fact that your professors and probably the library understand how important this can be and I'll go back to the name I mentioned, Forester Lee, Woody Lee, class of '68. The work that he's done to put in a library, in my

opinion, can't be matched. I think I know a little bit about Dartmouth history, because the work in the Alumni Relations Office gave me a chance to learn stuff that I just don't think I would have learned in any place, but I had to go find it. Nobody told me about Caleb Watt. Nobody told me about the Spin Down Award. Nobody told me about so many things. I had to go, I found some books. "What are these?" Dust them off, read them. Go ask some questions somewhere, go around and, "where do you get this?" "And where do you get that?" [inaudible] Spend many a day sitting in the reading room, just flipping through old copies of the Dartmouth that go back year after, year after, year, I just sat down there and read them. Because if I hadn't, there's so much in that I would never ever know. So go after it, find what you want. You can't lose. You can't lose. You'll always learn something. Thank you.

LAREMONT: Well, thank you so much, Nelson, it was so wonderful speaking to you.

ARMSTRONG: Thank you, thank you, thank you.

LAREMONT: I'm going to stop the recording.

ARMSTRONG: Okay.