

Dr. Judith A. Byfield '80  
Dartmouth College Oral History Project  
Dartmouth Black Lives  
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Transcribed by D. Dean Lowery '27

LOWERY: I am Dean Lowery, Class of 2027, at Dartmouth College. I'm here as a part of the Dartmouth Black Lives Oral History Project, on this day, February the 11th, 2026. I'm currently in Fahey Hall at Dartmouth College, [in Hanover, New Hampshire], interviewing Dr. Judith Byfield, Class of 1980, she is currently a Professor of History at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. Dr. Byfield, thank you so much for joining me today. Can you please state your full name and where you are?

BYFIELD: Okay, so my name is Judith Byfield, and currently I'm actually in Princeton [New Jersey]. I have a fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Study, so I'm here to work on my next book project.

LOWERY: That's excellent. Well, we want to thank you so much for participating in the project. I really appreciate you taking the time out of your day to contribute to this oral history project. This collective voices some of the earliest voices of the African-Americans who attended Dartmouth College back in the 20th century.

BYFIELD: I'm so glad that you reached out to me, and this sounds like a wonderful project. Really happy to meet you and be involved in the project.

LOWERY: Thank you so much. Well, I'll begin by asking my first question, where and when were you born?

BYFIELD: [laughs] I was born April 27th, 1959, in Kingston, Jamaica.

LOWERY: Excellent, and did you have any siblings? What was your family life like growing up?

I have three siblings: A sister, who we're only 13 months apart, so we sort of grew up almost like twins. Then my brothers, who are six

and a half years younger, were twins. We grew up mostly in what was then a relatively new development called Harbor View, sort of on the outskirts of downtown Kingston, very close to the airport. Actually, when you're coming from the airport, there's a roundabout, and it's the first community right off that roundabout. I lived there 'till I was 10, went to primary school. School started much earlier in Jamaica than in this country [The United States]. We started school at three, and by the time we left in 1969, I finished seventh grade and was supposed to start eighth grade. That year, I should have taken what they call the Common Entrance Exam, which is the exam that you took to get into high school or secondary school, yeah.

LOWERY: What was your school like life in Jamaica? I know you talked about it being, earlier, but did you have a lot of friends? Was it a very social time? What was that like for you?

BYFIELD: It's funny. My sister and I were just talking about this the other day. Our school was started by this woman named Hazel Vaz. We didn't have walls. [laughs]. I remember saying to somebody once, "Did your school have walls?" The schools, the classrooms really were built on these cement blocks, Then, there were these metal poles that held up the roof. blackboards divided the classes and on each side of the blackboard, in a sense, I think the blackboards divided the grades, and then on each side of the blackboard now you had like, three groups of students that made up different sections of the grade. Part of what we were amazed at was still that so much learning happened, even though there were no filters, nothing to block the sound.

Discipline was very rigidly enforced. This was a school that believed very liberally in beatings. We got beatings with these bamboo canes, and sometimes the ends of the cane would begin to fray, and teachers would tie the ends together with rubber bands, but you had to hold out your hand to get your beating. Sometimes the bits from the cane would actually get into the skin. Some teachers use leather belts. Mrs. Clark, when I was in third grade, used a leather belt, and she was the one that enforced our learning of the multiplication table. She was practicing what later on at Dartmouth, I— was the Rassias Method, where she'd walk around

and just say an equation to you: three threes. I got stuck on three threes. I got a slap, a belt across my back. My mother said, I went home and complained, and so she had to go up to the school and talk to Mrs. Clark.

Because the discipline was so strict, you didn't have kids speaking out of turn when you're supposed to be doing your work. You had your eyes on your workbook. We wrote with fountain pens, and the fountain pens, by then we weren't dipping it in the ink. Most of us had these little sort of capsules, like inside the pen, and when it ran out of ink, you dip it, put the point, then in the ink, and then, squeeze it, and ink would come up. You go back to write. We didn't learn to print. We learned cursive from the beginning, you got graded on your writing. [laughs] I remember one year it was my birthday, and the class sang "Happy Birthday" to me, and then the teacher was checking homework, and I'd forgotten the book with my homework at home, and so I got a beating. So it was a very, very strict school. You are expected to do well all the time. And if you didn't, I remember one time the Head Mistress, Mrs. Vaz, called me in her office, and she said, "Look here, you're not working up to your potential." I came to hate that phrase.

She said, "I'm sure you don't want me to tell your father, because we both know what he will do to you." I worked up to my potential after that, and so they ranked you, and the goal was to come in the top three all the time. My parents would have hysterics if I at least didn't come in the top four. There was a lot of pressure on us in school and to do well. But I also had good friends. Remember this one friend, this is the days when it was very common for people to get their appendix taken out. This one friend had her appendix taken out, and my sister and I went to visit her, and, she had a bottle that had the appendix in there, some sort of liquid, and it was just like, "Oh, wow!" I used to want my appendix out, just so I could have it. I could save it in a bottle. [laughs] I never ended up having it out. I still have my appendix.

That was just sort of how things worked. My sister and I, I mean, I know my father used to take us to school and bring us back, but probably by the time I was seven or so, we by then, one of my cousins, older cousins, was living with us and going to secondary school. Sometimes he would drive us to school, but we take the

bus back, and so one of the things that did was to make you feel very grown up at a very young age. Then one of our friends lived nearby, and I remember she had a cherry tree in her backyard, and so we used to go to her house first. Now we were supposed to go straight home, unless we had corrections. The way the system worked in Jamaica, after you did your exercises in class, the teacher. Teachers then graded everything. If you got anything wrong at the end of the school day, you had to stay behind and do your corrections. One afternoon, I got busted, because this friend who had the cherry tree, we wanted to leave so we could go climb her Cherry Tree, and she kept getting the things wrong, so I opened my notebook so that she could see it and then just copy it. But I obviously wasn't good at that, because the teacher busted us, [laughs] and so we both got a beating. [laughs]

That was one of the things I remember that was really fun to do. This was actually after my mom came to the US, before us, so when I was eight, and then my father stayed, and some of her younger relatives who were also in secondary schools, came and stayed with us. So we always had relatives living with us. This was a very common thing in Jamaica, that the relatives in the rural areas once they got to the age of secondary school, then, if they had relatives in Kingston, then they would move to Kingston. I remember one of my aunts always used to send us these boxes of sugar cane and coconut and bananas, all these things, because my cousins were there with us. But, when my mother left, this was most of the time where my sister and I would stop at my friend's house and we weren't supposed to. We were supposed to go straight home from school. This one particular day, we went to her house to play, and we were walking back, and our house was on the other side of a school, and so it's like, she lived, like, two blocks over from the school. If you just went over one block, then you could enter the school on that block and then walk across the schoolyard, and that would put us literally right in front of our house. [laughs] My sister and I got into the schoolyard and we noticed— It's a good thing we paid attention and looked up, because there was my father with my brothers, and yes, we would have been so busted. [laughs] So we walked back out, went up the avenue on the and walked all around now the long side, come down to our house. When he said, "Why are you so late?" "Corrections!" [laughs] and

that was it, he didn't think to ask anything more. We didn't offer anything more, but corrections was a good excuse.

LOWERY: That makes sense. Well, it sounds like you had a very intense educational environment, from what I understand. Do you think that served more as a detriment? Obviously, you're very accomplished academically now. Do you think that served more as a detriment to you moving forward, you think it propelled you to excellence later on?

BYFIELD: Well, it made being constantly pressured to live up to my potential, added layers of stress. But I actually liked school, so one of the things they would do sometimes were the students who did well in certain subjects. They basically have you tutor other students who weren't doing so well. I was one of the students who tutored in reading, and so I worked with some of the younger and in fact, not even younger. It was students in my own group, my own class, who I worked with on their reading. I, in general, liked it. Every so often, I had a teacher who I didn't particularly like. I wasn't crazy about, Mrs. Clark, [laughs]

LOWERY: Obviously.

BYFIELD: Actually, any teacher who gave me a beating was not on my favorite list. It wasn't that– I didn't really misbehave. It was, forgetting the books or having my friend cheat off me. But yeah, going to school wasn't something that we resisted. We had to wear uniforms. In fact, every school in Jamaica has uniforms, and that's usually how you can sort of identify – by looking at a group of students, which school they attend.

Our uniform was a blue jumper, a white blouse, Black or brown shoes. The jumper would be navy blue, and our socks also had to be navy blue. If you had something off in your uniform, they did not allow you to come in. There was a time when we were wearing berets. But, being kids, we lost them more often than not, so they gave up on enforcing those [laughs] but all the other parts of the uniform – and I remember, my mom would get us up early, we would get dressed, and then they would allow us to sort of go back to sleep until my father or my cousin was ready. But we had to be

very careful to sort of lay down on the pleats in the skirt and not make a mess of them, because you couldn't look raggedy going to school. [laughs]

My father worked at a textile factory. He was the manager of the factory, and he had started with them from the very beginning. Both my parents come from rural areas in Jamaica, they had both gone to primary school, but their parents couldn't afford to send them to secondary schools, so their formal education ended with primary school. But they were both very aware that they were very good students, and they also liked school. It was, it was really disappointing to them that they couldn't go further, and that's part of what motivated them to make sure that we went to the best schools. Our high school, our school, our primary school, Vaz Prep, was one of the best schools on the island, and it's still considered one of the best schools on the island.

But they both left the rural areas as young adults, and he actually walked from his village. He lived in a seaside community, and he walked from there to Kingston, which is about 40 miles. He slept outside. He had an address for someone that he knew that used to live in their community, and he eventually found his way to her house, but the woman had moved, and the people living there did not have her new address, and it was an older woman and her granddaughter, and her granddaughter said, "Well, he has to stay." Eventually, he ended up staying with them for a while, and then he looked for a job. The job he got was basically what they called a yard boy. He was hired by this family to take care of the outside, and then whatever other things they needed help with. And it was a Lebanese family. Jamaica has a really diverse population. Besides, the vast majority are African descendant, and most of us come from West Africa, parts of what is today Nigeria, but many are descended from people who came from what is today Ghana. Then, Indians and Chinese were brought in as indentured servants in the 19th century. Then by the end of the 19th century, into the 20th century, people [are] leaving what's called the Levant area. Today, some of them would be Lebanese, some of them Syrians. They came to Jamaica too, and a number of them got involved in retail trade and all and so it was one of these families that my father

worked for, and the son started this factory. He taught my father to cut. He initially trained as a cutter.

The mother had been a professor in Beirut, and so had this really extensive library, and my father was a bit of a nerd. Whereas, other guys who had similar jobs, particularly on the weekend, they would leave and hang out and whatever. My father was not into hanging out. As we got older, we could not say we were hanging out, either. You had to be doing something productive. You could watch TV– at times. [laughs] Growing up, we only had one TV, and he controlled the TV.

She realized that he liked to read, and so she basically told him he could have his run of her library. On Friday nights, instead of going out and meeting up with other young men, he actually would sit and talk with her, and they would discuss the books he was reading. And, I mean, my father, really was a voracious reader, and for him, the perfect gift – and it didn't matter if he got the same thing, birthday, Christmas, anytime, gifts were involved, you just had to give him a book and a bottle of Harvey's Bristol Cream, and he was in seventh heaven.

But the other thing that actually made sense – allowed him to really master being a cutter, was that his father was a tailor. He did have some health issues, and started having eye problems, and so that ended his career as a tailor fairly early on. Then he started exploring a number of different things. My grandfather actually went to Cuba and cut sugar cane in Cuba for a few years. This was something very typical that men in the rural areas did. It happened up until the 1920s during the Depression, and then they stopped. Because of the high percentage of unemployment in Cuba, workers in Cuba forced the government to stop bringing in workers from other islands. He stayed with the factory. They didn't always know what they were doing.

I was visiting them one time, and I remember it was A&E. There was this special on the history of underwear, and we just started watching it. My mom was at church, so it's just my father and I there watching this thing. This was interesting – they were showing you what women wore in the 19th century, and they actually focused on

women's underwear. I don't think it had anything on for, around men, but the bloomers, all those other things. And then it was after World War Two that nylon really became popular, and he started laughing. I mean, "What's so funny?" He was laughing so hard he could hardly get it out. But it turned out, women's nylon panties were the first things the factory produced. One of the cousins of the owner of the factory, he was the like their salesperson. He was taking dozens of these panties to different stores. Then the stores stopped them and actually started returning panties to them. It turns out that there's a special machine that they needed to use to attach the nylon to the elastic in the waist and around the legs. But they weren't using the correct machine, and so women all around Kingston were having their panties fall off. [laughs]

Oh my God, I included that story in an article – when Leo Spitzer [Professor Emeritus of History, Dartmouth] was retiring. He used to be in the history department, and by that time, I was on the faculty at Dartmouth, and I included that story in a paper that I was giving in the conference that we had in honor of his retirement. I had started reacting the same way my father did. I started laughing, and I could barely get the story out. Then by the time I was finished, then the whole room was in hysterics [laughs], but they survived the panty debacle. [laughs]

By the time they had started the factory in the garage attached to their house, and by the time we came along, they had moved to a factory in downtown Kingston, had maybe, like, three or four stories. Yes, they were still doing underwear, but they were doing women's clothing, and they had seamstresses. In fact, that's where my parents met, because my mother was one of the women working there, and she worked on the embroidery machine.

They had a designer, cutters – my father trained, like the first generation of cutters in Kingston, and that's where they made our uniforms. We didn't buy clothes. My sister and I, we didn't have to buy clothes outside.

Anything we needed got done at the factory, and on weekends. I remember, she and I would go with him, and you're just around all

this cloth, all these machines, lot of straight pins on the ground, so you always had to be very, very careful.

I was six and a half when my brothers were born, so I felt very adult. [laughs] I had so much fun with them. But this was – my brothers were about a year and a half when my mom came to the US, and then we also had a housekeeper helping to take care of things. The first one we had, Oh, my God, she really was from hell, but she just tormented us. That period was particularly difficult for me because I was very protective of my siblings, and particularly my brothers. She would put too much soap on their face when she was washing their face, and it would get into their eyes, and, hey, would be screaming, and she would take her time wiping it off. I used to tell her off and pull her off my brothers. Then, my father would get home in the evening, and she would make sure she got to the door first, and she would tell him the word in Jamaica for being rude is feisty. She would meet him at the door to tell him how feisty I had been to her that day. Before he had a chance to just catch his breath, I was getting a beating. It was – it was a really awful period. It was actually, this woman was intimidating to my cousins because she was older than them, and so they weren't reporting to my father what she had been doing. It was actually one of our neighbors who finally told my father, and then he apologized for all my beatings, got rid of her, and the next person we had was so sweet. We really, really loved her.

We left in 1969. September 1969, my sister and I were wearing our dresses in the same styles, but I think mine was pink and hers was blue, and we had matching fishnet stockings. Then we arrived at JFK, and we were colder than we had ever been in our lives. [laughs]

Even though, for us – for Americans, the temperature in September is not bad, it's actually pleasant, but it was a temperature that we had never experienced in Jamaica. It was very, very uncomfortable. I remember that first winter, though, everything was so new. I remember the first time it snowed. We were staying with some cousins in Manhattan, and we actually, when we got home from school, we went outside, collected snow in a bag, in a plastic bag,

brought it back and put it in a bathtub, and then we all sat there watching it melt. [laughs]

Coming to this country [the United States] was very strange. We were excited about coming. A lot of people we knew were leaving around that time too. I remember we had told the minister at our church, and so, they did this special prayer for all four of us. Hope that everything would go well, and all the church we went to – it's funny, I can't tell you what they talked about, but my brothers did not like sitting in the church, and we would bribe them with everything, candy, promises for ice cream. They would take it as long as they could, and then they would run out the church. There was this huge yard outside, and then you would hear them screaming and running up and down. [laughs] Most of my recollection of church is actually just wondering, are my brothers going to embarrass us now?

But yeah, coming here, our development had single family houses. You didn't have upstairs, multi-story houses. In fact, it was our last year at Vaz that they built an upstairs on top of one of the blocks because they needed more room. That was the first time we had a classroom with walls and windows, and it was a big thing to go up the steps, and it was the seventh grade that was up there. So actually, my sister, she was really, really bright, and she had skipped a grade, so she and I were in seventh grade together. But yeah, you felt like a really big kid, and you had to go upstairs to go to your classroom.

I remember too about the other classrooms when it rained, and particularly if there was a lot of wind, the kids at the edge of the classroom would get wet because the wind would blow the rain. [laughs] I forgot when the rainy season started, but yeah, when rainy season started, you didn't want to be the kid on the outside. We still got so much out of the experience.

One of the things that was strange to us when we got here– when my parents tried to get us registered for school, they said, “Well, they have finished seventh grade, and they're supposed to be going into eighth grade,” but I was 10 and my sister was nine, and they said no. They put her back to fourth grade, and I went to fifth grade.

We were so bored. We didn't know American history, but when it came to reading and math – and I remember at that time, they were starting something they were calling New Math, and I was struggling with that, because in Jamaica, we had done long division. I knew how to do long division, and I remember the teacher telling me, “Don't worry about it,” just do what you are used to doing, because I was getting the right answers anyway. But the teacher, in fact, she would allow me to go to the library sometimes while the other kids were in class doing stuff, and I remember I was trying to read all the biographies in the library. I kept a list of the books I'd been reading, and I think it was about 100 and then other times she would, if we had tests, particularly spelling tests, she would sit me at the back of the room and have me grade the tests. Which meant the kids didn't like me, so I got beat up so much in that school. It was a school in The Bronx, and finally the teachers told my parents, “Just keep them at home.” [laughs]

I miss my fifth-grade graduation. [laughs] Then, in fact, there were kids from the junior high school who used to come and then beat all of us up when we were out in the yard. I remember they had these rubber hoses that they used to swing. Then, you'd hear the sound, and then they would chase us through the yard. All way round, I had very, very bad feelings about The Bronx for a very long time. After that first year, we moved to Queens and it was funny – my father ended up on the going to Queens on the subway by accident. He was supposed to have taken the E train going the other direction, but he ended up on the E train going out to Queens. He decided, Well, I haven't been to this part of the city. Let me just come out and see what it looks like. They had houses, not apartment buildings. He thought, “Oh, this reminds me of Kingston.” That's why he ended up finding a real estate agent out there to help find a house for us. By September 4th of 1970, we moved into this house in Queens, a multi-story house that, had room for everybody to grow. We again, still had people living with us, other friends of my parents would come up to Jamaica and also sort of needed somewhere to have a base as they look for work and got settled too.

My father went into the garment industry in New York, so he went back to being a cutter and worked for these different factories, and

one of the things that I came to realize that was interesting about the period we came – that was really the beginning of the deindustrialization, particularly in New York. Garment producers were moving production to the Caribbean, eventually to Asia. My father's career sort of paralleled this deindustrialization. A lot of the companies that he had worked for when we first got to New York, by the 80s, most of them had gone cutters, and he knew how to sew, or he understands, certainly, all the principles.

But by the time my sister and I were in high school, he actually started sewing for us, because he said my mother wasn't using the sewing machine. Well, she didn't have time, because she worked full-time, but she also cooked – did all the cleaning. That wasn't a thing that Jamaican men were trained to do. He would do yard work, but anything inside the house, basically, unless it, repairs were involved. It was interesting, though, when he started sewing, and because he worked in the industry, he knew where you could go and get really, really nice fabric for very reasonable prices. The thing for us was that the things he was sewing weren't in the stores. There was, velour was just coming in, and he made all these tops for us in velour and yes, they were nice and warm and all of that, but it made us stand out.

My sister and I weren't necessarily crazy about all the things he was making for us, because nobody else had them. Remember, there was one top he made for me out of velour, and it was sort of a rust collar, and the collar looked like a cowl neck. You folded it down. It was sort of wide, but then you could pull it up over your head, and it became a hood. When it was cold, it was very, very toasty. But I remember the first time I saw this – I knew nobody else in school that had anything like this. Some point I had to sort of get over sticking out like that, and just, sort of, move with it. But we, the same pressure existed around school – they asked around and found out sort of what was the best schools near us. My sister was only in fifth grade when we moved to Queens, and so she ended up going to school literally just two blocks away from the house. But I, because I was going to sixth grade, I ended up going to an intermediate school. It started with sixth grade and had an eighth grade. It was six, seven and eight, except that they had what was called a special program classes, and these SP classes did three

years of work in two, so you did seventh, eighth, and ninth in two years. Then in high school, you started at tenth grade, rather than ninth grade.

I had a lot of fun in junior high school. Made some really, really good friends there. Some of my friends actually went to a Catholic Church near my house. When we moved to Queens, there weren't many West Indians in the neighborhood at all. We lived in Saint Albans, and it was one of my friends, my best friend at the time, who was in seventh grade, said, "Oh, you should come to church with me." My sister and I started going to this Catholic church. My mother grew up Evangelical in Jamaica, and wasn't crazy about it, but at least we were going to church.

The main thing for us was also that Catholic Church had a gospel choir, and immediately we joined that choir. My parents loved the choir director, and they knew that she was a very responsible person and shared the same commitment to education. Literally, all the students who were in that choir went to college. It was just an expectation – and the fact that we were participating in this choir, we did different activities. In the winter, Rockefeller Center would invite choirs from around the city to sing in front of that statue there by the ice rink. We did that every year too. My father actually sold the choir robes for our choir. We saved us a lot of money that way. We went to mass. We went to 10 o'clock mass. That was the only mass that the choir sang in. It was an absolute blast. At Christmas we'd sing at midnight mass, and Cathy Green's parents always had eggnog waiting for us after mass. [laughs] We didn't get back from Christmas mass to like two or three in the morning. Some of the friends – that junior high school had – in sixth grade, everybody played an instrument, and I was given the clarinet. I was awful, and our attic was unfinished, and my parents used to send me up there to practice. If you really stunk at instruments, then in seventh grade, you were put in the choir. I was also in the choir now at junior high school, and that was a lot of fun.

When I graduated from junior high school, I ended up going to Stuyvesant, which is a Science and Math High School. This is one of the specialized high schools in New York. And while I was at Stuyvesant, some of my friends from junior high school had heard

about All-City Chorus, and it's a chorus where it's open to anybody in the city, but you have to audition, and then if you're accepted, then you join. Both my sister and I were accepted, and then friends from my class in junior high school – they were twins. They were accepted too. There were four of us in All-City, and then a girl who grew up down the block from me, just four houses away, she was also accepted in All-City. I knew all these people now in All-City, but what it meant then was that I also did join the Glee Club in high school too. Between junior high school and high school, I did a lot of singing. And yeah, so in junior high school, I sing in with the school Glee Club, the school choir, and then the Gospel Choir. By the time I was in high school, it was again, the Stuyvesant Glee Club, All-City and then the Gospel Choir and All-City rehearsed on Saturdays and in Manhattan, and we lived way out in Queens, and you had to take the bus to the subway, and then you caught the subway – the F train at the first stop, and you'd have to go into Manhattan, now. Stuyvesant was also in Manhattan. Took us an hour and a half to get to Stuyvesant from Queens, but All-City was sort of midtown in the 60s, but on the east side. Six days a week we were taking the subway into Manhattan. And there was one semester where I was taking physics, and I was struggling with physics, and my parents were like, "Well, something has to give." I said, "Okay, I'll give up Glee Club," [laughs] but I kept All-City and the church choir.

But I really, really had to sort of buckle down and do that. And All-City was just so much fun. We sang with different groups. One time, we sang this new piece that was commissioned by the New Haven Symphony. We'd meet at Lincoln Center, and then buses drove us to New Haven. and then when we got back, like midnight or something like that, all our parents were parked around Lincoln Center waiting for us. My last year, I was in one of the small groups in All-City and that group had All-City students, but professional singers who the director knew. He was very good friends with Dizzy Gillespie, who was a jazz trumpeter, and we sang backup for Dizzy Gillespie at the Newport Jazz Festival, which then was actually happening in New York. That was 1976.

I was also Editor-In-Chief of the yearbook at Stuyvesant. I was so busy. Man, I remember going to a party and meeting this guy. We

didn't go to many parties, but my parents didn't give us a curfew. The rule was we couldn't drive with other young people. He had to drive us, and he would come and pick us up. We just had to call and say we were ready. This was given by someone we knew from Jamaica, that neighborhood that we moved into soon got populated by literally, cousins, my mother's sister and her family moved in that neighborhood. They were like 10 minutes away. Her brother and his family moved to the same area. The woman who had been her hairdresser in Kingston also moved to that area. My father's best friend from Kingston also moved to that area. We were surrounded. In a way, it was, somewhat a different experience for some immigrants. But there was this continuity for us, because these are all people that we knew from Kingston who then lived near us. There were some who lived in The Bronx, and we would see them occasionally too. But it meant that, I was just sort of surrounded by Jamaican culture, but literally family and old friends, fictive family, as well as biological family all those years. Then we— [pause] I was so embedded in those, in that community, with all those people we had known even before coming to the 'States— and then, actually, through the church, I got to know a lot of the kids in my neighborhood, because so many of them were also in the Gospel Choir. They were the people I socialized with in the summer, the church hired us as camp counselors, so we were all together again too. I had these really tight networks, and so when it came time for college — man my father and I had a major blowout.

I said to him, I wanted to go to City College, as it was a struggle for my parents, meeting all the bills and everything. My father's job wasn't permanent, and so, he would have to go to the union office and find out, it was like being a temp, almost. Somebody would call in to say, I need somebody who can do this. Then he'd go. Sometimes, he would be able, he would be at a place for like, two, three months, but other times it was just a week. My mother had the stable job, and she was a nurse's aide at the Queens General Hospital. She actually earned less than he did, so this was the thing with cutters. They're sort of at the top of the pyramid in the textile factories, but they didn't even if you are permanent — it's seasonal, and so there were times even the permanent workers would be temporarily laid off until things ramped up again. Money was tight. My best friend, who was the one who had invited me first to go to

this church, St Paschal's. I should say, I'm still in touch with people from St. Paschal's, including our choir director. [laughs] We have a Facebook page.

My friend went to City College and was telling me all the things that were going on in college and what she liked and all. I just said, "Well, yeah, that's reasonable for us too, given, the finances." My father said, "No." I said, "But you can't really afford more than that." Then he said, "No child of mine is going to City College." He got the Baron's Book of American Colleges and Universities, and that was his bedtime reading. In our house that became that damn Baron's Book. I iced him out of my process because I was so upset with him. We got decent counseling at Stuyvesant. I came up with the list with the college counselor, applied to the schools, and just didn't tell him anything. I wanted to go to Northwestern, because the rep from Northwestern, every time he came to New York – and I was being courted. He would call me up and invite me to tea at the Plaza Hotel. [laughs] Yes. Oh my god, so I was convinced I was going to Northwestern.

My Dartmouth interview was a very disappointing experience. The alum who interviewed me, I remember he worked – I think he was a lawyer. He was not sociable, and so he was just asking questions, and had his head down as he was writing my responses and all. I walked out of there thinking, "Yuck, I'm not going there." To be honest, the only reason I had applied to Dartmouth was because I had misplaced the Cornell application. [laughs] I don't know what I'd done with it. I'd gotten schools sending me all this stuff and all and because of Stuyvesant's reputation, a lot of them came to the school. After a while, I was just tired of the whole process. I just needed to find somewhere to start in the fall, because my summer was already mapped out. I was going to be — and I was — the Arts and Crafts teacher at the summer camp run by the church. Our group — the Newport Jazz Festival was over the Fourth of July weekend — that concert was set, the group was going to continue singing.

I had also gotten into Vassar and Barnard and NYU. I would say, in addition to being courted by NYU, the other school I looked at seriously was Barnard, because the people who did the interviews

there were so much fun. I remember one guy – and they wouldn't do that today, but he lived in an apartment near Broadway and 72nd Street. And I went there, and he was home by himself, and this was the interview, and I felt comfortable with him, and he pulled out their yearbook. He had a wicked sense of humor, and he started talking about all these people, and I was howling. And then after you get through that first interview, then you have a second interview. That's a group interview now, down at, I guess, their club. I went for the second interview, and two out of the four people in the room were people I had heard stuff about from that first interview, but they were just fun people to be around. I knew I didn't want to be in the city [New York], because I was just determined to put a lot of distance between me and my father. And Northwestern also did that. But then I got in, I got into all the schools, and because of the Baron's Book, my father said I was going to go to Dartmouth, and I said no. And he said, "You're going to Dartmouth."

I slammed doors. That was my thing to show how upset I was. I kept slamming doors. I was muttering. I was so unhappy. What caught me one day I went to school, and I was looking sad, this guy, I knew he was in one of my classes, and he was like, "Well, what's the matter?" I'm like, "They're forcing me to go to Dartmouth." And he was like, "But I want to go, and I didn't get in." I had to stop. I had to fix my face after that. I made peace with it. Said, "Okay, I'm going to go."

Then, Dartmouth had this thing called the Bridge Program. It brought particularly students of color to the campus the summer before, to sort of acclimate you to all this stuff. The program, of course, summer term starts end of June. I had the Fourth of July weekend concert, and so I said, "I'm not going to the program." He [my father] said, "Yes, you are." A whole 'nother battle started, and my mother– Oh, my God, I tell you, I owe everything to my mother. Because my mother called the Dean, who was in charge of the program, and said, "We're having a problem."

Ed Cottrell, oh, just– wonderful, wonderful person. She said – she told him, "She has this concert and she's singing with Dizzy Gillespie," and it was Ed Cottrell who said, "She can't miss that concert. She has to go to that concert. Put her on the train the day

after the concert. I'll meet her at the train station, and then we'll help her catch up once she gets here." I showed up July 5th. By then, what, the second or third week of the term? Cottrell was there to meet me. On one hand, I was glad I did go a little early, because I got to know people. It was a slower time than the regular fall stuff. I got acclimated.

I also got sick and ended up in Dick's House for about a week, week and a half. My parents came up, and I remember the Olympics was on that year. Yeah, 'cause this was '76. My father would sit up in the room with me, and we'd – watching the competition on the TV. One time he turned to me and said, "See if you'd gone to Northwestern we couldn't have come and visited you if you got sick." I was like, "Alright, alright." [laughs] He pushed Dartmouth. My brothers ended up at Dartmouth too. My brother is a class of '86. One wanted to go. The other one wanted to go to Vassar. They both got into Dartmouth, and my father said, "I'm only driving to one school." [laughs] So they both end up at Dartmouth too.

I think one of the things that did help salvage my relationship with my father was that I found my community at Dartmouth. If I hadn't found a level of comfort there, found people around whom I could have fun, it would have been torment. I joined the Glee Club at Dartmouth. I also joined the Gospel Choir. I took voice lessons my first year. I kept singing at Dartmouth too. It was challenging socially – some classes were challenging in ways I didn't expect. When I was in high school, I would get 100 in French, 100 in biology, so some of my grades were really, really high. 75 in physics. The physics teacher and I agreed, "At least you got through it." Stuyvesant only gave regents high diplomas. The Regents are these – in New York State, it's this exam that's set by a state board. Many people – well not all high schools actually require the regents to pass the course. But if you take the Regents exam, and you do well, that goes on your transcript. It helps when schools, colleges and universities are looking at you. Stuyvesant only gave a Regents diploma, so for every course for which there was a Regents, you had to take the Regents. If you fail the Regents, you fail the course. Even if you had passed the whole semester, I luckily always passed my Regents.

Oh God, there was this math teacher at Stuyvesant, Mr. Fisher. He would finish the requirements by about April, and then for the last month, all of May, every night, your homework was half a Regents. So that by the time you took the Regents in June, you were so well practiced at it that his classes, usually, everybody usually passed the regents. But he and I had a very testy relationship. I had him for spring semester sophomore year, when I was doing geometry, and then spring semester, junior year, when I was doing trig. He thought I was put on this earth to torment him. [laughs] Usually people either did poorly or very well. He was a sort of person who, if you did poorly on a test, he'd say, "why are you here?" He would name some other high school that wasn't very strong and say, "That's where you need to be." I messed up the plan, because one week I would get a 92 and the next week, I would get a 55. He was like, "Miss Byfield, can't you pass all the time or fail all the time?" He made me such a nervous wreck. I told my mom – and one time, in fact, my mom went up to see him, but it was because I was so stressed out, I threw the math book at the door to my bedroom, and it cracked the door. She went up to see him, and after that – junior year, when I'm in trigonometry with him, he'd say, "I'm not going to scream, 'cause otherwise, Miss Byfield will bring her mother back up here to me." [laughs]

But, the funny thing is, I stopped being afraid of him. I refused to sign up for calculus senior year and Stuyvesant, it was almost expected that everybody would sign up for calculus. The chair caught me in the hallway one day and said, "Judy, I'm a little concerned. I see you didn't sign up for calculus." I said, "No, because with my luck, you're gonna give me Mr. Fisher again." And he said, "Okay, okay, okay. How about we are doing a new course, the history of math. Why don't you sign up for that course?" Man, I loved that course, and I'm so glad he encouraged me to take it, because I would have come out, graduated, thinking, I'm just not good at math. But that course helped me figure out that actually, I'm good at some aspects of math.

I remember doing my research paper on Sumerian math that used Base-six instead of Base-10. Our teacher, this is the 70s, the hippie

stuff was still in. Our teacher would sometimes come in a poncho and bring his guitar, and he'd start playing in class.

Mr. Fisher's class came in after our class. [pause] Mr. Fisher's class would use the room after the math history class. He got into the habit of giving me a kiss. So given how we fought my sophomore year and junior year to now senior year, I'm getting this kiss every day. One time in class, he screamed out to all my classmates, "She gives wet kisses." I was like, "Oh my gosh!" Oh my goodness. In fact, junior spring, when I took the trigonometry Regions, he saw me in the hall one day, and he said, "You failed." I just, I don't know where this came from. I just looked at him and said, "No I didn't." I just walked off, and he started laughing. [laughs] Oh my gosh, but by that time, I think just the thought of not having him in class again was such a relief. But yes, I get to Dartmouth now – I'd gotten 100 in biology [in high school]. I take the bio course at Dartmouth. I'm thinking, I actually want to be a bio major, because I found biology easy in high school. I remember I had a 680 on the achievement test. It gave me a credit that I came in with. I took Bio 5. I was like, "Why is my head spinning? This doesn't feel right." That sort of dashed that hope. I didn't drop it immediately. I did take calculus there. I remember I took the Chem – I think I may have taken Chem 5, I think too. Then it was like, I'm not – I wasn't used to struggling that way, except for physics. [laughs] I was like, "I don't know what I'm doing here."

I was also taking all these other classes that I really, really liked. I took all of these courses that were sort of Af-Am classes, or AAAS as it's called at Dartmouth. I took a number of courses through them too. Those courses I absolutely loved. A number of them were literature courses. Then I did French for my language. I had done French at Stuyvesant, so, was a breeze at Dartmouth. I think that was part of the struggle for me. I was used to having most of my classes sort of being breezes, and the level of struggle I experienced was really upsetting. My parents never said, "Oh, you had to have a 4.0 or anything like that." It was like, "You're there, you do what you want." They didn't try to influence my major or anything. That was up to me, whatever I liked.

Sophomore fall, somebody encouraged me to take Ed 1. He said – Oh gosh, his nickname was Boomer. His first name was Paul, but I'm drawing a blank on the second name, but I had known him from the Bridge Summer too. He said, "I guarantee it, you're gonna love it." He was right. I absolutely fell in love with Ed 1.

By the sophomore year there, we're supposed to declare your major. I was in a real quandary, because AAAS could only be a minor, and education could only be a minor. Those were the things I liked best. Bill Cook [Professor of English and African and African American Studies] who – Cook was just an amazing teacher. I was the work study student in the AAAS office and Cook was the chair at the time, and so I went to him and I said, "I don't know what to do. I can't figure out what to major in." I'd considered French at one point. I took my Freshman Seminar, was an Art History course that I absolutely loved, and it was on masking traditions in Africa. I had come in thinking maybe I wanted to be a bio major. I wasn't interested necessarily in Pre-Med, but because I'd enjoyed bio in high school, that's why I thought I wanted to do that, but that idea is gone now.

He said, "Well, why don't you create your own major," which I didn't know was an option. [laughs] He said, "You should major in what you like." Since I liked AAAS and I liked education, then I should create my own major. He walked me through the process. I did end up creating my own major, set out what courses were my pre-recs, and then, sort of the five major courses, and then what would be my sort of capstone course. A number of my courses – so I also decided that I was going to get the teaching certificate in elementary school language arts. Since I was interested in Language Arts, then having this sort of interdisciplinary, sort of major made sense. I took music courses. I did try another Art History course but did not like that one – a number of literature courses. I did an independent study with one of the professors in sociology, Ray Hall, on nationalism in Cuba, Haiti, and Jamaica. Read myself crazy. Only later on, realized, oh, that was too much for one paper. I wanted to do a long paper, and I remember it was a 30-page paper, and I felt very accomplished having done that.

The other thing that intellectually Dartmouth turned out to have been a really good place for me. Partly because it had those subjects that I was so interested in. I did end up getting the certificate, but during my student teaching, I realized, “Oh no, I was not cut out to teach fifth grade.” I remember going to Cook and saying, “Once again, I have another dilemma. I have to figure out what it is I want to do after I graduate, and I no longer want to teach elementary school.” What I told him – what I think I would like to do is to go to grad school until I figure out what it is I want to do. And grad school made sense, because through Cook, I had learned that I really liked intellectual work. Working in the office with him, if he was working on a lecture and something, just tickled him, he would come running out and reading it to us, and it was just me and the administrative assistant, this older woman named Evelyn Brown. Evelyn made a birthday cake for me every spring. We celebrated my birthday together. I just thought, this was so much fun. It didn't feel like, work– didn't feel like onerous work at all. I think his example was what really made me think – what really made me just consider grad school, because I didn't know – any, none of my family members, had gone into graduate program. Once I hit high school, I was, what do they call it? Next generation, or I forgot the term. For, the first, no, First-Gen. That's it.

LOWERY: First generation students.

BYFIELD: Yeah. I was first-generation high school in our immediate family. All of this was very new. I didn't know what to expect or anything. In watching, sort of what he – how he approached it – and then I enjoyed my classes. One of the things that I remember remarking to somebody, after sophomore year, I just loved my classes. All subjects that I was really, really interested in. I wrote papers. I was much stronger at writing papers than taking exams. Oh god, I took Psych 5. I hated that course. [laughs] Oh my goodness, yeah, in a way, the AAAs office for me, was sort of an intellectual home. I worked in the Ed department office one semester too, and again, just enjoyed all the people there, because I really liked the courses I took there as well, too. Some of the books they had us read back then, I actually use now with some of my students or at least advise them to read some of them. Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the*

*Oppressed* was one of the books we read in Ed 1. Oh, my God, that book had such an impact on me. [pause]

I only took one History course, and eh, I was ambivalent about it, and even though I knew the person who taught African history, because the AAAS faculty had meetings in our office. There was sort of a lounge there that could accommodate everybody, and so I knew all the faculty, but it just never occurred to me to take the African history course. It was only by the – what I was trying to decide what to do now. I said, “Okay, I’ll go to grad school. So what am I going to focus on?” I told Cook that I didn’t want to do any more literature courses. I didn’t want to go into a literature program, because I was afraid I would lose my love for reading. I’d only taken one history course. I hadn’t exhausted it, and I liked history in general, so I would go into History and go into African History. Most of what I knew about Africa came from that Art History course and the Literature courses where we had read Achebe. Also, one of my music courses that Bill Cole [Professor of Music, MA ’87] taught, also did a lot of stuff on Africa. I went to grad school being largely clueless about Africa, but also about what to expect in grad school, where I was lucky was the fact that my advisor in grad school was very much like Cook, in the sense that they never discouraged me. I would say, “I think this is what I want to do,” even like Ray Hall, who, when I told him I wanted to write about nationalism in Cuba, Haiti, and Jamaica, he was like, “Okay.” [laughs] They would just sort of let me go off and read myself crazy, figure things out. In that way, I had a really non-traditional sort of experience, and it framed a lot of what I would do later on.

LOWERY:

That makes perfect sense. Loved to hear all about that. The educational side, coming to the United States, and decided to go to Dartmouth and the influence that that had later in your career. I wanted to take a step back a little bit and more of the social context of, being in Jamaica, particularly with the Rodney Rebellion, or the Rodney Riots, which happened in October of 1968 which would have been right before you left Jamaica. A student protest after Walter Rodney had been banished from the island. I would just love to hear a little bit of your perspective on that event and how that influenced your decision – your family decision. Obviously, your

mom was already in New York, but your decision to leave and come to the United States.

BYFIELD:

I have to admit that when I was in Jamaica, I knew nothing about those protests, because most of those were happening downtown, since in '68 I was nine. I was aware, though, that things weren't going well in Jamaica, and that was really the motivating factor for my parents to leave. The company that my father worked for got bought out by Americans, and they – I don't remember the name of the owner now, who kept telling him that education was free in the US. Your kids could get good education. Education was really the main thing for he and my mother, because my sister and I basically had one more year in primary school. My brothers were almost four, so they should have been starting primary school, and so that – and it was a private school, and so that would have meant four kids in school at the same time. I think they were going to keep my sister a second – I don't think they were going to let my sister take the high school exam, but I was supposed to take it. In Jamaica, that was the exam that you took was what determined what your tuition would be. Depending on your score, you could get a full scholarship, where the government paid all the fees, or a half scholarship, or no scholarship, and then your family had to come up with all the fees.

They were very concerned about the possibility of having four kids in school whose school fees they would have to pay. Given what my father was hearing about the US and other people were leaving about this time, that inspired them. The other thing that had become clear, by '68 – this is stuff that I've now learned since I started teaching. My parents were part of that first generation of people who left from the rural areas with just primary education and managed to do well in Kingston – to sort of, achieve this middle-class status and that they were able to, then, give their children the opportunity to have that sort of social mobility was really important to them. They were dark-complected Jamaicans, and Jamaica had a color problem. In banks, TV, some of these things, if you were dark complected, you were not going to get some of those jobs. Also, college cost a whole lot too, and people wanted to be able to get – because the University of Jamaica was established in 1948. Again, it was difficult for people to be able to afford to get there. My

parents were aware of the protest that was going on, and my father was very, very political and very on top of those things. He just thought, things weren't going to get better in Jamaica. We, my sister and I particularly, were getting to that age where the finances were going to become more challenging if they had to pay for us to go to high school. They decided that was the right time to go.

Coming back and teaching on that era, I really have a better sense of why they decided to go. I mean, at one point for us, it was just exciting, "Oh, we're going to go to America," When we first came to America, it was challenging. The kids in school, the children were so badly behaved. I would just be so amazed at the things they would say. They would give the teachers backtalk. Backtalk was one of those things in Jamaica that you were not supposed to do. That's why you got beatings. [laughs] My sense of Jamaica was – we were somewhat insulated from some of what was happening. We were going to this same school for all those years. We lived in this community. Knew a lot of people there, if we weren't there – in fact, most times when we traveled in Jamaica, was to go visit relatives.

I had never been to the hotels. The first time I actually experienced Jamaica as a tourist was basically as an adult. I started going back to Jamaica – my first trip back was my graduation present to myself in grad school. [pause] No, it was after college. It was after college because it was, I think it was '81. My parents had sent my brothers back because my brothers were so young when they left, and they wanted them to have a sense of Jamaica. Mosquitoes tormented them, and they came back and told my father, "Don't ever do this to us again." My sister went back to Jamaica and did a transfer semester there. She had gone to Princeton, and so her senior year, she spent one semester in Jamaica. Yeah, that was '81 I had finished my first year in grad school. I went and met her down there.

I was seeing Jamaica in a really different way by that time, because that, yeah, that was the first time I went into a hotel in Jamaica. By then they had built this area called New Kingston. A lot of banks and shops were there, sort of upscale shops and things like that. My sister said, "Oh, you have got to see new Kingston." We went

into a hotel, and there was this shop inside the lobby area now the hotel. She and I are walking around, and then we realize we're being followed. She had braids in her hair and so and, we're both dark complected, so that was enough reason for them to follow us around. Then we started speaking with very American accents, and it went from following us to asking us, "Is there anything we can do? Do you want to see anything special?" Then we were like, "No, we're leaving." Those weren't things that I had experienced as a child, because my parents really curated the parts of Jamaica that we saw.

I remember one of the – there was a beach near us in Harbor View called Gunboat Beach. I had no idea why it was called Gunboat Beach. Sunday mornings, my father would take us down to Gunboat Beach after breakfast, and we just walk along and play in the water. We never went far out. In fact, we didn't learn to swim, partly because sharks spawned on that side of the island. My sense of Jamaica for the 10 years that I lived there was fairly idyllic in some ways. Issues at home – I wasn't that aware of the issues downtown, but my parents were very, very aware of them, and that really cemented their decision to leave.

LOWERY: Earlier you mentioned how violent and how kind of dangerous a world – not only school was, from Jamaica, moving to New York. I would love to hear a little bit more about how that affected your perception of school and kind of – you felt like, being dark skinned, if there was any boundaries to your education in that sense.

BYFIELD: Yeah, that's such an interesting question. I mean, most of the students that I met — That elementary school we went to in The Bronx, and we had started at that school, because at one point, my cousin, who we stayed with initially in Manhattan, had gotten sick, and so we moved and was staying with another family in The Bronx. Their son had fought in Vietnam and was coming back. That was why we had to leave there and then come back to move back to Manhattan. It's funny, to some extent, I was aware of – before we left Jamaica, I remember telling my father I was happy about the thought of leaving to come to the US, as long as we don't go to the South. That's because in Jamaica, we were aware of what was happening here [in the United States] in the civil rights movement. I

have distinct memories of when John F. Kennedy was assassinated. I remember my mother was at the hairdresser's, and they were only about a block or two away from our house, and I went over there to give her the news, but they had had their radio on, so they heard the news. I remember just everybody in there was in tears. I remember when [Martin Luther] King was assassinated. Because, particularly in Jamaica, we got BBC News, and they did a lot of international news. My father read — oh, we also got *Time* magazine in Jamaica too — so we always had reading materials about the US. I wasn't into the magazines at that time, but through conversation, I was probably more aware of what was going on in the US than in Kingston. [laughs]

One of the things I remember distinctly when Haile Selassie came to Jamaica, and I forgot what year that was. Because our neighborhood was so close to the airport, it was one of these areas he was going to, sort of the — they would have to drive past our roundabout, and there were a group of Rastafarians who lived in the hills, up around our community. I knew that people were fearful of Rastafarians. For some reason, I was on the road, I was out of the house, and I have, I just have this memory. I don't know if it's a memory I created or if it was real, but I have this memory of being down by the roundabout and being surrounded by all these Rastafarians — seeing his car pass. I didn't tell my parents, so I suspect I really could have done it, because that's the sort of thing that you would not share, because there's no way on earth, they would have given me permission to be down there. I wasn't that aware of stuff, but coming to the US, I was so relieved when they said we weren't going to the South, we were going north. One of the things I remember thinking, “Good, there won't be any ghosts there.”

Jamaica — people just are so invested in ghost stories. The side of the island where my mother comes from — we had visited her. My sister and I had spent two weeks with some of her relatives. Soon after my brothers were born. My great uncle would tell us ghost stories every night, and the family graveyard wasn't far from the house either. We were terrified. This is late 60s. They didn't have running water or electricity. In Kingston, we had all those things. My parents had a phone and we had a television. The standard of

living we were used to was very, very different from in the rural areas.

New York – when we first came there, it was scary, because my cousin lived in – she lived in Harlem, up on 141st Street, I think, between Broadway and Amsterdam. This was a time when a lot of drugs were about the place. We had never lived around quite so many people. And I remember one time, the way the building was structured, there's like an inner courtyard, and then you went through this one tunnel that brought you out to the sidewalk. We came out the door, got through the courtyard. We're going through the opening now, and all of a sudden, my father put his hands over my eyes, and I'm like, "What? What?" When he finally moved his hand, there was a woman standing in front of a car right at the edge of the sidewalk, and she had on a crocheted dress and nothing underneath it. He was trying to block my view. [laughs]

My parents were petrified. They would not let us out to play. If we went out, one of them had to accompany us, which meant that when we were out of school, the four of us spent the entire day in the apartment. My brothers were four, you can't tell them not to move. So constant complaints from the neighbors about the noise. My parents were like, tough. We are not letting them out there. Which is why Queens, when they finally bought the house, there, seemed like night and day. There were, I mean, drugs were beginning out – were out there too. I remember a lot of people was into pot. Again, I was with that church crowd, and so none of my friends were doing any of that stuff. I mean, in some ways, we were goody goody two shoes.

I remember my first party at Dartmouth, because I got in that Saturday on the train, and then there was a party that night, and I went. Everybody knew why I was late, that I was singing at that concert. I remember this guy in the basement of the Am [Afro-American Society] came up, looked me up and down and said, "Sheesh, I was expecting a New York woman, you look like a daddy's little girl."

I was so embarrassed. [laughs] I think there were many more students, and particularly, there was a larger number of Black

students, certainly at Dartmouth then, than in the 60s. Many of us came from somewhat similar backgrounds. Our parents, had trades, or some were professionals, worked. We all came from families that really stressed education. We used to joke that if we flunked out, well, we couldn't go on South. We had to just keep going North, because we couldn't show those grades to our parents. I think that – it was very familiar, you know? It was reassuring. We studied together sometimes, and a number of us were also in Gospel Choir. We socialize that way too.

I think where I stood out was when it came to not being American. Because it's in college, it was at Dartmouth that I really came to realize how different, having lived and being raised entirely in America is from those of us who were immigrants. There were very few Caribbean students at Dartmouth at the time. I think there were only four of us that I knew at that time. There was another person in my class, Verna Cole ['80], and Verna had also been part of Bridge Summer. Part of what we talked about were those differences. I remember people talking about like, shows they watched as children. Those shows never got to Jamaica. I mean, we had *Bonanza*. [laughs] I don't know exactly why, but actually, Jamaicans loved country western music, so Marty Robbins was a really favorite singer. So many people had his albums. My father had a really eclectic album collection, and I remember he had Perry Como as well as Marty Robbins. Miriam Makeba, who is a South African singer. That was – we listened to really eclectic music. But my father said that both my sister and I came back from college more Jamaican than when we went to college.

LOWERY: Interesting.

BYFIELD: Yeah.

LOWERY: To think about the kind of the identity, how do you think your identity, like you mentioned, you felt more Jamaican after, there are only four of you there. How do you think your identity, being a Jamaican American, kind of shifted throughout the course of your time at Dartmouth?

BYFIELD: In a couple of different ways. One was that there were elements of African American culture that – my parents were very open-minded, and we always had friends from different racial and ethnic groups. At Dartmouth, I sort of continued that. I had friends who were white, friends who were Native American, Chinese – in fact, for my whole time there, I was involved in an interracial relationship. He was White American, Jewish from Connecticut, and some people really hated it – and would tell me, and I will be like, “You don’t give me daily breath. Why should I care what you think?” I get ornery when people try to control me sometimes. I still went to all the Am meetings when they had. He and I went to all the parties. I remember one time in one of my classes, just sometimes people would say things that really just threw me. One of my friends – and, I mean, we were friends at Dartmouth. We remain friends after Dartmouth, but we were reading these writers from the 60s, and some of whom were saying, “We’re completely against interracial relationships.” During the conversation, everybody knew I was involved in this relationship. During the discussion, she said, “Oh, I have no problems with people in interracial relationships, as long as they don’t have children.” I tell you, good thing your eyes are really secure in the socket. I was so stunned, because I just never knew people who thought like that.

I think the other area for me – where my difference stood out was actually in terms of my politics. So, my father, in Jamaica, we have a party, that was a socialist party. In the 1950s, they were affected by the Cold War. I – sort of the anti-communist politics that was happening in the UK, as well as in the US. In '52, the party throughout – the members of the party that were thought to be Marxist, they – combine everything. If you’re Marxist, you’re communist, that’s it. They were thrown out of the party. Part of what made Michael Manley so important when he became Prime Minister in 1976 was that he restored, sort of, socialism to the party principles. My father self-defined as a socialist, and he had been a member of the, it’s the PNP party. In our house, there was a lot of conversation about Marx. I remember, my father actually agreed with my mother that we needed to go to church. Partly, he said because, it’s a part of our culture, and he didn’t want us to be culturally ignorant. We’d come home from church, and he’d teach us to play cards. 21– and my mother thought all gambling was just

wrong, even just, recreational card playing, she didn't support it. He would tell us, "Just remember, religion is the opiate of the people." We're like, "Okay, daddy." [laughs]

Growing up in Queens, we got, he bought all three the New York papers, the *Post*, the *Times* and the *Daily News*. We got *Time*, *Newsweek* and *Soviet Life*. The politics of the household I grew up in was really different from most of the people I met at Dartmouth in that both the Black and the White students, in my mind, had no class analysis, and that's such a central feature of Jamaican politics that it was just weird. Class dominated, really. There's a relationship between class and color in Jamaica, but class was the dominant political topic that we discussed. It just wasn't something that came up, it was as much a part of the conversation in the US as much as race. I was also friends with a number of the students who were from Ghana. There was a small group of students from Ghana, all men, who had been to Achimota, which is one of the best secondary schools in Ghana.

In my mind, I talked class politics and internationalism, with the African students, with the African American students, it was more race, and then, sort of more the social stuff. All of us came together, in a sense, in the Am and then all of us certainly participated in the protests that happened. Being part of the anti-apartheid struggle was a very natural thing for me.

LOWERY: I wanted to get exactly into that. I think one of the most significant events – Dartmouth was in a very political state, in the late 1970s and one of the most important events I think that happened in your time at Dartmouth was on February 9, 1979. There was a divestment protest [for] South Africa. It was a mock funeral – was held. Protesters carried a casket from Parkhurst [Hall] to Cutter [Hall] and then placed, in roses, in an ice grave constructed next to Cutter Hall. I'd love to if you remember any of the details of that event, the effect that it had on you.

BYFIELD: Yeah. Yes, I, in fact, I was at the Am meetings where we tried to figure out what to do. One part of that involved what to do with the sculpture, the snow sculpture in the green, in the middle of the green. I remember we said the decision had to be unanimous, and

so we were there for hours. Some people talked about chopping up, because the theme that year, I think, was the circus. The sculpture was a clown. Some people said, "Let's melt it or let's chop it up." Then other people said, "Actually, no, let's paint it." They – and then other groups were brought in, so forgot the name of the women's organization, but they were brought part of it too. The Native American students and I remember, actually, I think we went from Cutter to The Green, and the Native American Student drummers were leading, sort of the groups, all of us together as this procession moved on. I think a number of the guys that were carrying the coffin were [Alpha Phi] Alphas. This was also happening at just all these colleges, all these campuses around the country. You're trying to get people to divest, and basically, they were coming back to you with, "Oh, well, we'll support the Sullivan principles," which are supposed to make the lives of – make certain concessions, like within labor contracts and things like that, but things that weren't fundamentally going to transform apartheid and that was a really big topic. I remember, just a number of different meetings, speakers, coming through. One of the speakers, I met this guy, Prexy Nesbitt. Prexy was one of the main organizers, and he worked for the American Field Society [American Friends Service Committee], something like that. He spoke at a number of colleges around the country. He also knew a lot of South African activists. Prexy was invited to come and give a talk. I don't know who did the invitation. It may have been students from the summer students from the Am– I'm not sure.

It was so funny that I met Prexy there, because Prexy had been helping the students at Princeton organize, and he knew my sister. At Princeton, the students there had taken over Firestone Library, and they very self-consciously organized in cells so that nobody could identify a leader of them, but they knew the administration knew that she had been involved, and so they threatened to suspend her. They called the house and spoke to my father and told – she'd been involved in these protests, and they were threatening to suspend her, and his reaction was, "That's all right, it's a good reason." We got full support from my parents, and I think for us, that was one of the things that was really significant. Their expectation actually was that, well, your work should still go on. The work shouldn't suffer. The politics is a part of the work. That's the

other thing that I think happened to both my sister and I during this time period, in that we also more clearly defined our own politics. My father created this larger context for us. I think we actually claimed it more as a result of our experience in college. The funny thing with my brothers, so there were some more anti-apartheid protests by the time they were there. This was when the students from the review knocked down the shacks.

LOWERY: Yeah, the shanties.

BYFIELD: Shanties, yeah. One of my brothers was among the students who had been sleeping in the shanties and then took over the president's office, and the other one was on – oh, I've forgotten now that committee that hears student cases.

LOWERY: I can't think of that, Student Review, Is that correct?

BYFIELD: Oh, I don't remember. I don't think that's what it was called then, but there was a committee that included faculty and students, and the students who had been in the shanties were brought before them. My one [brother] participated, and the other one helped legislate. The fact that they didn't get suspended – but for all of us, my father was always interested in South Africa. Given the fact he had Miriam Makeba's album from when we lived in Jamaica – so for us to now get engaged – get involved in anti-apartheid politics when we were in school, it was just a perfectly natural thing to do.

LOWERY: Yeah, and I'd love to – you mentioned the *Dartmouth Review* a little bit. I know they didn't form until 1980 so that would have been, they would have been really coming into formation after you graduated.

BYFIELD: Yeah.

LOWERY: Love to hear more about kind of the reaction of the White-American students to these protests, and the way that you felt your classmates viewed you and others who are participating in the planning, and participation in these kinds of protests.

BYFIELD: There were always, white students who were more progressive. Some of them, I got to know, through the Ed Department, because

the Ed Department was, at the time, considered probably the most progressive department on campus. That's why we were reading Paulo Freire. We supported, in fact, the first protest – I used to go to protests when I was in high school. I don't necessarily remember all the issues that led us out, because I remember one time we did a walkout from Stuyvesant, and we went to this other school near us, Mabel Dean Bacon. Some people lit a fire in a garbage can. The Stuyvesant people said, "Okay, that's all right. We can go now."

At Dartmouth, there were just certain communities or certain segments of the student body that were known for being progressive in their politics. Certainly, not all the Black students were equally progressive. I think partly, the anti-apartheid brought together a lot of folks, regardless of their own political orientation. We also – a lot of Native American students participated, and there were similar issues. Oh, I forgot what year this was. I think it actually may have been when we had that big protest, because it was the anti-apartheid stuff. It was also – there were some really racist cartoons that had come out, Sambo cartoons in *The Dartmouth*. The first issue of the [*Dartmouth*] *Review*, I think, came out with our graduation. The *Review* wasn't publishing yet, and so it was *The Dartmouth* that used to carry this awful stuff. Then there were cartoons that depicted women as hockey players with a dog peeing on her leg because it mistook the leg for a fire hydrant. Then they were doing the Indian cheer at hockey games, and it was all of those things together. You had all of these students from these different groups, and the Am was very much determined that we wanted to get as large a population of people together. This wasn't just a one issue thing. In fact, Kemeny cancelled classes the next day, and we had conversations happening all over the campus. I forgot what he called it, but it was these sort of small group conversations to talk about just the racism that the Black students experience, the stuff that women experience, because this was also – my first protests at Dartmouth were actually equal access protests because the quota was still in place. It was three men to every woman. We had protests around. Forgot the building that admissions was in, is it McNutt [Hall]?

LOWERY: McNutt [Hall], yes.

BYFIELD: Yeah. We would have protests around McNutt [Hall] demanding equal access, and this conservative group would be across from us on The Green, all of them dressed in white, playing croquet. One of them was a Trinidadian guy who would insist he's not Black. He's Trinidadian. Yeah, for some people, they would use their ethnic or national identity and not acknowledge a racial identity in the US. Yes, we did come out of a different racial landscape. Dark complexion mattered here, so there's no running away from it. So in some ways, I spent much more time with the Black Students Association, but I was sort of on the periphery of a number of these other groupings of students as well.

That said, the stuff – I remember one friend and he had gone to the same high school. He had gone to Stuyvesant, so I knew him from Stuyvesant, and was a baseball player, and this one kid one night, basically said to him, "You're just a guest at this college." I think there was a baseball bat involved, but either way, he did get some discipline, some sanctions for that. It was so typical. It was common, you'd be told constantly that you don't belong here, or you got here only because of affirmative action. Then I remember when [my boyfriend] and I would be on campus, sometimes we got reactions from both white students and Black students. We were at The Hop one time at a party, and group of these white guys came in. I think they were frat guys. One of them looked at me and said, "Oh, my God, I can't see you. It's so dark." I was so upset. We had to get out of there.

In fact, the first time I was called the N-word was at Dartmouth. My sister and I were – it was Winter Carnival freshman year, and my sister came up and we were walking towards the Am. This car with these four white guys in there just, called out, "Nigger bitches!" We were so stunned. We'd never, literally never, had been called any of that before, and our only reaction was to start cussing, and we cursed up a storm. [laughs] The car was long gone. The racial politics of the US was all was so much interwoven into our Dartmouth experience.

I remember, Black students used to give each other all this intel. When we were going on foreign study programs, they give you an

orientation, but they never talked about the reaction of French families to students of color. It's the students who had gone before you who would tell you what to look out for. The book, I think [John] Rassias had created the textbook that we all used. There was a family that was sort of the main family at the center of the book. I was going to go to Bourges and a friend who had been – and in fact, someone I knew from Bridge Summer, she had been to Bourges the year before me. She said, "Make sure they don't put you with that family." She said, "They're very racist." I actually asked to be placed with the family she stayed with. By the time I got there, the father was gone. I never figured out where he was. The mother was in the hospital. She had an amputation. The son, who was like in his 30s, he was a dog groomer, and he was living at the house. Monday through Friday, his assistant stayed in the house too. As I remember, I called up my parents and I said, "This is the situation." They're like, "Well, are you comfortable?" I said, "Yeah." They're like, "Okay, that's fine with us too." He did all the cooking. Classic, the first night I'm there, and we're trying to have this conversation. He said, "I have a Black friend." I was like, "Oh, that's nice." He was good friends with the family that was at the center of the textbook. His house was like, a mile away, so it was a little too far to go for lunch, so I actually had lunch with that other family anyway. They were very pleasant, until the subject of Arab men came up. Then they would lose their minds. I had never before experienced, sort of Islamophobia. In fact, one of the things I remember them saying, "We don't take girls students, because those Arabs will rape them."

France itself, too, was an experience. I got – I never got stared at as much as I did in France, and people would just stop in their tracks and just stare at me. I used to swim, and I would go to the pool, the kids would be staring, the mothers would be staring, and I just had to ignore all of them. Jump in the water, do what I wanted to do, and get out. I had a man one time spot me on the highway. Did this really ugly U-turn come back to ask me if he could drive me where I was going. I was like, "No." Because I was Black, the Senegalese people would often acknowledge me and wanted to talk. Bourges had a basketball team, and there were a number of Black American players who played on their basketball team. I got to know the wife of one of the members, and so she and I used to

get together often, and we'd go shopping because my accent was better than hers. She was from the South, and so French with a Southern accent really confused people. [laughs] We'd go shopping together, and she would say what she wanted, and then I'd have to repeat it for them.

Even on that program, there were very few people I felt comfortable with. There was one other Black student who I knew from Bridge Summer. Then there were a couple of the white students who were comfortable hanging with us. There were, not all the frat boys were this way, but there were some frat guys who were rude and dismissive, and we just kept a distance. In those days, there were very few Black students who socialized over in the frats. There are always a handful. When the protests happen – it happened though. There were some frats that called, made it known they were going to try to destroy the murals in the Am. Then there were other frats that called and said, and we'll help you defend the murals in the Am. There was a real split for a while there. I think, by the time I was graduating – I told so many people I was never setting foot in this place again. And they all reminded me when I went up to visit my brothers, and then when I went back on the faculty. Socially, Dartmouth was a hard place. But intellectually, it was a good place for me to be.

LOWERY: Right. That's kind of the dichotomy there, right, of the social aspect, was brought in, on the intellectual side – I'd love to get into your post-Dartmouth experiences. You wrote a number of – you authored, edited, and co-wrote a number of works about Africa in the 21st Century. I'd love to hear a little bit about how your experiences at Dartmouth shaped your work as a writer.

BYFIELD: Yeah, it's so interesting. Deciding to go into history when I hadn't been a history major was not a wise move, necessarily. I just had a lot of catching up to do. As I – in grad school, by the time I got around to deciding to work. My first book was on the textile industry, actually, indigo dyeing industry in Western Nigeria. Many people thought that I got interested in the topic because it was textiles, and because my father had been a garment worker. I said, actually, that had nothing to do with it. It helped though, that my father was in the textile industry. There are a number of things that I

was familiar with, and so it helped me understand the production process that these women carried out. I was telling you I had done that independent study on nationalism – Cuba, Haiti and Jamaica. Nationalism was one of these topics I was always interested in. That experience of that independent study was really profound for me, because I was just so taken by nationalism, the anti-colonial movements of the 1950s and 60s. Nationalism really was at the center of the work I'd wanted to do in grad school. That first book actually was not my original dissertation topic. The first book was actually to look at a women's tax revolt. Then how that tax revolt in 1947 contributed to women's role in the nationalist movement. The thing was, I was in Nigeria for 11 months, and sort of realized that if I wanted to come up to the Tax Revolt, I would need to spend another year, and I wasn't prepared to do that. I needed to understand why the Tax Revolt happened. I was going to have one chapter that looked at the economy and the industries that women were mostly involved in. I was going to have one chapter that looked at the tie-dye industry, but once I made the decision that I wasn't going to get up to 1947 – I thought there were enough political issues involved in the tie-dye industry itself from the decade before that it made sense to make that the focus of the dissertation. My original dissertation topic is what became my second book, *The Great Upheaval*. That interest in nationalism stayed with me through graduate school, also my interest in gender.

My final paper for Bill Cook was a comparison of several African American writers. I was just – I was taking all these courses that had to do with gender and women's history, specifically. To the point that, when I got to grad school, and they said, "Well, what are you going to work on?" I said, "Nationalism, women and Nigeria," because those are the things that I knew best from Dartmouth. It still took an evolution to really get to where all of that developed. The other thing was that same independent study on nationalism in Cuba, Haiti, and Jamaica became the basis for, then what became my Caribbean history course – the course I did on the Modern Caribbean. I brought that course to Dartmouth when I was on the faculty there at Dartmouth. Again, I did that paper as an undergrad. Who would have thought that, 30 years later, I would still be teaching a course that fundamentally was based around that

paper? One of the things I came to appreciate was that having those three countries as the main case studies allowed me to also teach the course as a course of comparative colonialism. We had to talk about the French Empire, Spanish, as well as the Anglophone empire.

The other thing that I think really shaped my work was the interdisciplinary nature of my special major, because all my books have been very interdisciplinary. The art history stuff came in so handy when I was writing that first book, because I had to be able to talk about the relationship between textile and art. Even though the use of these cloths was very utilitarian, they were expected to be used for clothing, not just to hang on walls or something. I had to talk about the artistry of the designs and what the designs meant and how they were produced. The other thing, all the English courses that I did really helped me to develop my skills of close textual reading. For me, it was, I was following Bill Cook's advice, you should major in what you love. That's all I was doing. I was just taking what I loved. I had no idea just how foundational all of those things would have been to then, ultimately my career. The other way in which it shaped me was that in the courses, I was doing African American – some things on African-American culture, the one on the Caribbean, and then I had done art and music on Africa. That shaped what I teach. I teach African and Caribbean history. I also teach a course on it's called Dress, Cloth and Identity. It looks at cloth production, how cloth contributes to identity formation in Africa. I teach a course on popular culture in Africa, so I get to include music. I include art, even radio, just a whole range of things – so that my teaching has been much more holistic and certainly reflects that interdisciplinarity that I was able to sort of do at Dartmouth, because no one shoehorned me into any one thing.

LOWERY: Right.

BYFIELD: The stuff I was doing, they knew it was going to be challenging. I sort of laugh at the fact now that Ray Hall did not tell me to do a paper on nationalism in Haiti, Cuba, Jamaica. That should be a dissertation project, not a 30-page paper. They were like, if you wanted to explore this, go right ahead.

I – that is also influenced the way I work with students, and particularly my grad students. They want to do topics on things that haven't been looked at before in quite the same way. Students doing, their dissertations always end up being much more interdisciplinary than they anticipated. For me, it's paying forward what I was so generously given at Dartmouth. Then also in grad school, I thought of this thing it was so integral to the way I thought that my first year in grad school. I took an art history course– and a literature course – and history courses. [laughs]

LOWERY: Yeah, that's tremendous, just to hear all about in the ways that Dartmouth and then later your time at Columbia and grad school influenced the way that you come to teach and the way that you write, which is tremendous. One final question I would like to get into, we've had so much happen. You're thinking about the unrest, and the political movements that happen. During your time at Dartmouth, we've come, through the Reagan era into the LA riots. Now, I'm thinking about, more recently, the Black Lives Matter movement. What is your current perception of the college? You talked about how you felt, you would never step foot in this place again. You come back with your brothers, being six and seven years behind you respectively. What are your – just as a closing question, what are your perceptions of Dartmouth at this present moment?

BYFIELD: One of the things I, [pause] so I talked about the – in a sense, the atmosphere and the racist atmosphere at Dartmouth, when I was there and people were just open. They would tell you to your face, you didn't belong there. By the time I came back on the faculty, there was, I think, sort of less of that openness around those issues, but they still existed. Dartmouth was also much more diverse when I came back than when I was in undergrad. The Black community was also much more diverse because now, when I got back on the faculty and found out there was a Caribbean Students Association, I was like, "Oh, my God."

There were many more African students as well, too. There were also tensions within that as well. Some migrant communities accepted some of the stereotypes that were broadcast about African Americans, and so in some ways, thought that – well, they

were better because they came and they worked hard, and were so successful. I actually give my parents credit for us not thinking that way, because my – and again, because my father was such a voracious reader and the nature of his politics, he was very, very engaged in what was happening politically here. I remember after Obama won the first election; I was asked to give a talk. I said, “To be honest with y'all, I've been living with Obama for the last four years because once he gave that talk at the Democratic Convention in 2004 my father said, ‘That's him. That's the next president.’” He was a firm supporter of Obama from that time on, but he – I think [pause] there were these tensions, some of which got actually reflected during Obama's presidency. That he wasn't fully African American, or not African American in a way that people felt comfortable. One parent was white; the other one was African. There was a time too, I think, particularly by the time I came back on the faculty, this tension between what some people call the historic African American community versus the more recent African American community. Those were children born of folks – migrants from Africa itself, and people were calling attention to the fact that the numbers of African Americans from that historic community had actually gone down. They seem to have been replaced with kids whose parents came from the Caribbean, or who themselves were from the Caribbean or from Africa. So that – I would be invited to talk to this broad international group of Black students to help mitigate some of those tensions and to get people to talk honestly about it. But I said, because my father talked or discussed these issues, always insisted that we owed a debt to the civil rights movement, because it was that movement that opened these spaces that we were now able to move into. They never accepted the idea that African Americans didn't work as hard as Jamaicans or – and of course, the Jamaicans work harder than the Trinidadians, and so you find some of this in all of these different regions.

The thing for me that was missing when I was an undergrad were spaces to discuss, in a sense, the psychological impact of this idea that we didn't belong. Behind it would be these assumptions about IQ. That would get somewhat buried when people would say, “Well, this one is an affirmative action doctor.” They would say, “That's the type of doctor you don't want to go to.” More recently, I forgot who

said it – now, maybe was it, Charlie Kirk? Somebody about being on a plane where there, if you saw a Black pilot, he would assume, that's an affirmative action pilot, and that's the plane to not go on. That's part of the reason I had to remain a part of the African American community when I was an undergrad – it's because it's those students who helped you navigate that landscape. Yeah, people may have been progressive, but it didn't necessarily mean the same person who was progressive about the government was progressive on race. You sometimes just, got these comments from people that would give you a whiplash.

It was the other Black students to whom you could talk about stuff, discuss these things with them, and then would also – we would end up talking about our own individual strategies of how you keep moving, despite what the people sitting next to you in class thought. When you're in a class where you're one of two or three Black students, you can't help but stick out. One of the other things the Intel people also shared was which professors only gave Cs to Black students. I listened to those things, and I was like, “Okay, so I'm not going over to that professor or even maybe that department.” That's partly why AAAS for me, was such an energizing space. People assumed you were a person of intellect. You were someone who could learn, who was curious about learning, that you would actually also do well. To be in a space where your intellect is taken for granted, is really important when the larger community questions everything about you.

When I started doing work in Nigeria, that was one of the things that I remember saying to somebody, “Oh, my God, I'm just a historian.” You know? I'm not just a Black historian who then we have to assume that, oh, what, she got to those schools because she was Black, not because I had the potential to be a good historian. I would go to Nigeria, and I'm hanging around all these other people who look like me and are also historians and sociologists, scientists. I think actually, too, that's one of the things that being born in Jamaica gave us and that actually was somewhat advantageous. I did not – everybody, yes, not everybody looked like me. The majority did. You could be smart, you could mean – my parents expected the best of us. We had to live up to those expectations, and even when they stopped beating us, it was so

ingrained that it was natural for us to assume we're going to live up to those expectations.

I think part of what we're seeing between the Dartmouth when I was an undergrad and what's happening now is that we're returning to a period where those conversations are very public again. The people who are quote, unquote anti-DEI so many of them are eugenicists. And I don't hear Dartmouth or Cornell for that matter, challenging that. They keep saying, "Oh no, no, we believe in diversity, even though we have to remove the word and change all these programs and all that." But I don't hear anybody coming out with a robust statement against the eugenicist thinking. Trump doing that thing with the gorillas? That's 19th century stuff. I feel sad for those students who are now experiencing this Dartmouth with the fear that also things could get even worse before they get better.

LOWERY: Well, Dr. Byfield, that was an excellent answer. I want to thank you so much for participating in this program. I have been Dean Lowery, class of 2027. This interview took place in Fahey Hall on the campus of Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. Dr. Byfield, thank you so much for your contribution to the project.

BYFIELD: Oh, thank you, Dean. Those were great questions too, and it was nice to have the opportunity to sort of cover that whole spectrum.

LOWERY: Absolutely. Thank you so much for your time.