

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

YSU History

Black Student Experience project

OH 2249

JAMES DAVIS, Jr

Interviewed by

Tilisia Williams

on

October 23, 2023

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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Interviewee: James Davis, Jr.

Interviewer: Tilisia Williams

Subject: YSU History - Black Student Experience

Date: October 23, 2023

TW: This is an interview with James Davis, Jr for the Youngstown State University project on the Black Student Experience. This interview is being conducted using Webex. Today's date is October 23, 2023 and my name is Tilisia Williams.

Hello Mr. Davis. How are you?

JD: I'm okay. Basically medically I'm not okay, but otherwise everything is okay.

TW: I hope you feel better soon.

JD: I do too...

TW: Where did you grow up? Where are you from?

JD: I'm from Youngstown, Ohio. I lived on the South side. My address was 437 West Myrtle Avenue. In fact, my house is still there. Not too much of the neighborhood is there anymore, but my house is still there.

TW: What was it like growing up on the South side of Youngstown?

JD: It was an environment, it was inclusive. Everybody lived in homes. The neighborhood was such that everybody knew everybody. We all went to school, walked to school together, played together, enjoyed each other's homes. Enjoyed dinner, supper or whatever together. But it was a good neighborhood.

TW: Are you a first-generation college student?

JD: I am, yes.

TW: What or who encouraged you to go to college?

JD: Teachers, my parents, and the fact that neither my mother nor my father finish elementary school. And then I had my own reasons for going. I did well in school, so I really wanted to continue. And my other reason for going to college is I wanted to be a doctor.

TW: Why did you choose YSU?

JD: Because of monetary constraints and YSU was right there, it was on the North side. My parents said they couldn't send me anywhere else cause they couldn't afford it. So I went to Youngstown.

TW: What was your first year like here in Youngstown? Do you remember anything about when you first came here for school?

JD: Well, you know, getting scheduled and finding where you were supposed to go for classes because at that time the school was basically in one block on Rayen Avenue. At the other, and going up Wick Avenue, Fifth Avenue on the other side. So, it was basically one big block. As far as the education part, it wasn't a big adjustment. I guess the biggest adjustment was that I was a Black student there, about 16,000 white students. It was more of a community school because a lot of the students drove there. But you know, as far as being a part of an ethnic group, there weren't many of us- maybe about a hundred of us that were there. I guess that was my biggest adjustment.

TW: How did you adjust to being one of maybe one hundred Black students going to this university?

JD: I wasn't there on campus. I had class. I worked full time and I was going to school full time. And until I got used to what YSU had to offer in terms of what was there, the biggest meeting place was the cafeteria. And I decided to become part of different groups that were there. I became a part of the tennis team while I was there, but that part of it just wasn't a big deal.

TW: Earlier you mentioned that you wanted to be a doctor. Why did you want to pursue a career as a doctor and did it change as your college career went on?

JD: It definitely changed about midway through my sophomore into my junior year. Why I wanted to be a doctor? Well, that's kind of hard for me to answer but I just wanted to be a doctor. I wanted to be a particular type of doctor that dealt with women, so that was that.

TW: Why did your mindset on your careers change?

JD: Because of one, getting bored. Two, I didn't have the grade point average to get into the subject area that I needed. So, I had to make a decision based upon my grade point average, what would be my next step as far as my career would be.

TW: And what was the decision you ultimately made?

JD: I went into the School of Education.

TW: And how was that transition? Did you prefer education more than you preferred medical school?

JD: No, but like I said because of my grades, I had to go back an extra semester at school to get what I needed to get into the school of education, so that's what I worked towards and I accomplished my goal.

TW: Did you have any personal relationships with any faculty members? Anyone who may have helped you or mentored you while you were going to school here?

JD: Basically, no. I just availed myself to counselors or even to faculty members, but no particular person.

TW: Did you take any courses in Black Studies?

JD: They didn't have any.

TW: They didn't have any at the time you were going to school here?

JD: Right.

TW: Did that affect your mindset about how you thought about YSU?

JD: No, I mean...it was just an area they didn't offer. It didn't affect my mindset at that time because the mindset of the nation, especially in Youngstown, wasn't in such a big Black/ White concern in terms of going to school and getting a job and things like that. As far as Black Studies, if Black Studies was there for me or not, I probably would have taken those courses just for my experience and my knowledge. It wasn't there, so I took what was available for me in terms of what my career changed to be.

TW: Were you apart of any fraternities or any other groups while you were here?

JD: They had one Black fraternity, which was the Kappas [Kappa Alpha Psi]. They had one Black sorority, which was the AKAs [Alpha Kappa Alpha]. And I was not interested in either of the two. We started an interest group for a Black fraternity group called Alphas [Alpha Phi Alpha], which were called "Pyramids", and I stayed with that group until I moved to Newark.

TW: Excuse me, you moved where?

JD: Newark New Jersey after I graduated.

TW: What career did you pursue after graduating?

JD: Well, when I graduated, I had a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education. In one of my senior classes, I got hired to teach school in Newark. So when I went to Newark, that's why I went. I went to teach school.

TW: Was there much of a culture shock moving to a bigger city such as New Jersey from Youngstown?

JD: There was a culture shock from many aspects. In Youngstown, I lived in a house. When I got to Newark, most of the people, depending upon which section of Newark you stayed in, they stayed in apartment buildings. I wasn't used to that. The population was much larger. The city was segregated in terms of ethnic groups, in terms of religious groups, and the social mores were different. But I got used to it.

TW: Was your first choice to teach in Jersey? Would you have liked to teach in Ohio? There weren't any other jobs that were closer?

JD: I did my student teaching in Youngstown... The elementary school that I did my student teaching in is now no longer in existence, but that was Monroe Elementary School. I had made up my mind to just follow through on the job offer that I had, as to staying home or as to staying in Youngstown.

TW: Do you feel like leaving and going to New Jersey was the best option for you at that time?

JD: It may not have been the best option, but it was the better option at the time.

TW: Would you say that New Jersey was, despite the segregation, would you say it was more diverse than maybe Youngstown or was Youngstown more diverse as far as the culture?

JD: Well, see, I'm going to answer that question this way: In Youngstown, Ohio it's sort of like...where we lived, we accepted it. We knew in my area of the South side, it was very diverse. But if you moved out going up toward Warren, Indianola, Market, up that way, then it became more that's where a great deal of the white people stayed. And you had different sections of Youngstown. Rayen was diverse. I mean the Northside was diverse but you still had areas where Blacks stayed to have areas where Whites stayed. The Northside, I mean, that that's the same thing. And then you had the West side, which was basically white. But it wasn't a standpoint of being dissatisfied with where you stay because where you stayed, you were able to deal with life on a day-by-day basis. You know, you weren't fighting, or you

weren't calling people different names and all like that, that that wasn't in existence. And even when I went to South High School, you know, you met the people that you didn't go to elementary school with there at the high school. And still there, there was a type of segregation that was there. It wasn't spoken of, but it was there. And as I got into my senior year, it started sticking out it's hand and you became more aware "why is it happening this way?" and "why are certain decisions made?" ...But Youngstown was alright with me at that time.

TW: You said you grew up on the South side of Youngstown. What high school did you go to?

JD: South High School.

TW: And was that high school mostly white people or was it also diverse, like your neighborhood was diverse?

JD: Well, the high school brought all the areas of the South side together. So it was diverse. You know, you have black, white, Hispanic. There weren't too many Orientals at that time. And there are a few other, you know, nationalities that were there, but it was it was basically Black and white.

TW: Do you feel like your high school experience has prepared you for college in any way?

JD: Repeat that again, please.

TW: Do you feel like your experience is in high school or whether it be education or maybe the social interactions that you may have had or being in a more diverse environment prepared you for college in any way?

JD: Yeah, you know, I felt it did. And then I think also I was able to adjust, you know. And I think I adjusted well.

TW: There are a lot of pictures of you in the yearbook, and I noticed that on the tennis team you have a nickname, Ed.

JD: Well, my full name is James Edward Davis Junior. That's my full name. And Eddie, that's what they call me most of the time. If you knew me, you call me Eddie. Some people call me James also.

TW: Why Eddie? Why did they use your middle name?

JD: I don't know. It just, it basically it just happened that way. I guess most of the people that knew me, who I grew up with, you know, that's who they knew me by, Eddie. They didn't know me by James Eddie or James Edward. They just knew me by Eddie. And in high school, the same junior high school, high school, same thing. Even elementary school. Eddie, that was my name. Oh, you found pictures of me in in the school book?

TW: Yes, Sir. There are pictures of you. There's your senior picture, pictures of you on the tennis team. And I noticed that the names are different. I think your senior picture is James Davis, your regular name and it doesn't include your middle name. And then your tennis, it's Ed. And so I was confused. I thought you had like a brother or something.

JD: Nah that's me. They're both me.

TW: What was your experience like playing on the tennis team? How long did you play tennis while going to school here?

JD: OK, I think I'm telling you right. Did I play all four years that I was there? I was there longer than four years. I was there five years because I didn't graduate until the summer of 1967. That was the last year. After the summer term of 1967, Youngstown University that September became Youngstown State University. But let me say 4 years. I may be wrong, but I think so. And the tennis team was made-up of most of members that went to high school with me, from South High School. There was I think, a couple that went to Rayen that we played with. But you know, I knew them well, the members of the tennis team.

TW: Did you play tennis before going to college?

JD: Played at high school. Played for South High School.

TW: What was your experience like playing tennis at that time? Were you the only African American on the team?



JD: I think there was another young man that played... It was OK. I mean, I was accepted as another tennis player because the couple of the tennis players were from South High School. I sort of asked. They just told me no, you could just come on out and try. I came out, and tried, and I made it.

TW: Why was tennis your sport of choice?

JD: Well, my mother said I wasn't playing football. I'm serious. I know I wasn't that good for basketball and so I knew I could play tennis. So that's the way I went. And then with a little bit of traveling we did, you know, we went to other college campuses to play their tennis team and that was relaxing. I'm saying relaxing, but we got to see other campuses, got to see other people on the tennis team, meet other friends. So, in the whole, in the whole view of it, depending on where we went to play, you know, you got to see different things, different campuses, so forth.

TW: Where did you guys practice? Was there a tennis court here on campus? I know there's one now, but was there one at the time?

JD: No, we went to Mill Creek Park. The tennis amenities that they had there. We practiced there.

TW: Was that an inconvenience at all for school that commute?

JD: Now when you talking about the tennis team?

TW: Yeah you playing sports and also being a full time student and working a full time job. How did you balance all of them?

JD: Well I you know I did my schedule around my hours of working and if it happened that a match was when I had a class, I let the professor know a way that I can make up the work or whatever had to be done but it was done that way. I eventually got a car. So, you know, getting back and forth was not a problem. But most of the time when I did my studies that did not interfere with me working because I would either work in the evening or I could work late at night. So, it worked out.

TW: Did you feel connected to a larger community playing tennis? You said you guys traveled to lots of different universities and stuff like that.

TW: Did you build a larger network outside of school?

JD: Well, not so much because, you know, we just go to get there in time to play when we're finished playing the match and, you know, we get in the car, or if we had a truck from the school, come on back home.

TW: Do you feel as though YSU prepared you for your career as a teacher once you graduated?

JD: I'm sorry, what was the first part of that question?

TW: Do you feel like YSU prepared you? Do you feel like the education that you obtained here prepared you for your career after school?

JD: For where I went to teach, no. It didn't.

TW: Why do you feel that way?

JD: Because of the type of students that I had. I mean, I had theory and practice. I had necessary courses that dealt with elementary school, but it did not deal with the type of student whereby I'm teaching, let's say 6th grade and the students that I received couldn't read, couldn't write, didn't know the alphabet...so it was almost like that picture with Sidney Poitier when he got class in England and when he got his students there, he just threw all the books right in the garbage because they weren't going to help with the students that he had. And that's the way I felt.

TW: How did you cope with that feeling?

JD: Well, I didn't get discouraged because, you know, that was my paycheck if I look at it that way. And as I began to talk with teachers who were there and they began to help me understand certain things to do, it got to a point where I enjoyed what I was doing. And I developed ways to deal with the type of students that I knew I was going to get after my first year.

TW: And what were those habits you developed dealing with these students?

JD: Well, I went back to school not necessarily to deal with behavioral problems or learning situations, but some of the courses I took did open up my mind and my eyes to how I could deal in the classroom and not go to school every day disappointed or discouraged.

W: How long did you teach for?

JD: I worked in Newark for almost 40 years. I wasn't in the classroom all that time. I went back to school and got my Master's in Student personal service. I also worked at a community college in Newark, NJ- Essex County College. I did some consoling in the evening.

TW: What were some of your proudest moments as a teacher?

JD: I'm going to put it this way, I enjoyed every day that I went to school and taught, making colleagues my friends and learning how to adapt to situations. And then seeing students graduate, come back and say thank you. That's why I enjoyed teaching those forty years.

TW: Did you participate in any community work while being a teacher?

JD: Most of it still dealt with the Board of Education I worked for 'cause I worked after school- ESL classes. I worked after school for developing students who did not graduate and came back, take courses or develop basic skills, things like that.

TW: When you were a student here at YSU, where did the meetings happen with students while you were here?

JD: Where did the meetings happen? Now what meetings would you be referring to?

TW: Where did students gather to be social here on campus?

JD: Most of the time that was the cafeteria. Or in the library. Certain areas of the library where noise could be dealt with. But the main was the cafeteria.

TW: Where was the cafeteria located when you went to school here?

JD: I can point it out to you, but I can't describe it. If you took the middle of the campus at that time, it should be right in the middle. No matter which direction you came from, you could easily get to the cafeteria.

TW: Did you have your own friend group that you would meet with at the cafeteria?

JD: Not particularly, but the black population, we sat in a particular area of the cafeteria. So most of the time when I came in the cafeteria, I mean I could sit anywhere I wanted, but I would usually go there...it was like a corner. You could usually find us there.

TW: Where did you work while you were going to school?

JD: Kroger's.

TW: You worked at Kroger's? What was your experience working at Kroger's?

JD: I was taught some skills. It was interesting. You see people come in and try to take things they haven't paid for. I got used to that. I learned how to stock. I learned how to do the register so I could check out. And stocking the aisles, building areas, when there were certain things are on sale, they might be in front. So, as the customer came in, they would go up there. Basically, that's what I got from Kroger's. They had a nice salary, that's true. I enjoyed working there. And I tried to get as many hours as possible based upon what my schedule would allow at school.

TW: Earlier you mentioned a "pyramid" group that you guys were trying to start here called the Alpha...?

JD: Yeah, Alpha Phi Alpha. It was another black fraternity and that was the interest group for males that wanted to become a part of the Alphas. We were called "Pyramids."

TW: How many people were in the Pyramids?

JD: At the time that I was there maybe about 10...12. It didn't necessarily increase from my freshman year to my senior year. It was the same.

TW: What was your experience like being a part of the Pyramids?

JD: The experience was just part of the learning of becoming a part of a brotherhood. Learning how to get along with other Black males in terms of education, in terms of learning how to develop social skills, those kinds of things.

TW: What did you guys do within that chapter?

JD: Not too much. We did have some meetings that were under the direction of adult Alpha Phi Alpha men who lived in Youngstown. We would meet at the YMCA on Rayen Avenue once a month, whenever they called the meeting, we would go there. Most of the time it was in the evening, because most of the Alpha men worked, so that was the only time we could meet. They had an Alpha on campus, Professor Alfred Bright. He was in the Art department. He was an Alpha. At that time that I was there, I don't know if there was anybody else.

TW: Did you have any personal connections with Albright? Did you do any work with him?

JD: No. I knew him, but I didn't do any work with him.

TW: How long did it take to establish the Alpha chapter at YSU?

JD: There never was an Alpha chapter at YSU. [Alpha Phi Alpha Omicron Epsilon chapter was chartered at YSU in April 1980.] The Pyramid group was just an interest group established by Alphas who lived in Youngstown. I know during the whole time that I was there, the one male fraternity group was the Kappas and the only female group was the AKAs.

TW: Okay, so the Pyramids were started by Alpha alumni from other universities?

JD: I guess you could say that... that would be the best way to phrase it. Yes.

TW: Is there anything else you'd like to add? Anything else that you'd like to say for any younger students who may be listening to this interview? Is there any advice you'd like to leave for them?

JD: Now, to leave for them as far as they're entering Youngstown State University?

TW: Sure!

JD: My best statement would be to make sure you know why you are continuing your education at college. Make sure that you have a goal in mind while you're there on campus to pursue your education. 'Cause you're not there to party. You're not there to increase your social life. But you're there to study. You're there to learn and when you're finished, you'll go into the world community and help others. That's what I would say.

TW: Did you have any siblings growing up?

JD: I had two siblings.

TW: Did your graduation encourage your siblings or other relatives to go to college as well?

JD: That's kind of hard to answer. Both my sisters, one deceased this year, I still have another sister. I think they did one year there. They just did not have the desire to get a college education. I'm not saying it was not a part of their dreams, but they just did not want it.

TW: Is there anything else you would like to add?

JD: No, I don't think so. As far as I'm concerned, the school had a choir that I was a part of. And the director of that choir happened to be a top music educator at South High school and then he transferred to Rayen [High School], but he still worked at Youngstown University. So, programs where the choir had

to be used, I was a part of that. It might have been a program outside of campus. They had a rotary group on campus. I remember they had an essay contest which I won. That was way back when I first started. I did try to become a part of groups, clubs while I was there, but I basically forgotten some of the ones I became a part of. But, for me, I started in 1962 and finished up and got my degree in August of 1967. That ended the private Youngstown University and in September 1967, they became Youngstown State University. And when I come home, I ride up Fifth Ave, ride up Wick, and see how they've expanded- all the football fields, where they go play basketball. They even have places for students to stay, dorms and that...none of that was there when I was going there. Youngstown State University has expanded, it's doing well.

TW: What are some of your thoughts and feelings that you get when you visit the new campus?

JD: Mine is just from a visionary standpoint, what I see, as opposed to what it was when I left. I don't know what the population is now, but I'm sure it's even greater than the 16,000 or so that it was when I was there. So, I'm sure they've got more students that come because now students don't have to drive in and then leave when they get finished because there was no place for them to stay on campus. Some might have stayed at the Y[YMCA], some might have stayed at the places they have, but now they can stay on campus. I think it's worth noting that if I were to tell some people they should go to Youngstown State University, I would have told them "Of course!" because it offers a good education and depending on what your career is going to be, it's going to prepare you to go into the world community and have the skills that you need.

TW: Well, thank you so much Mr. Davis for coming in and sharing your story with us.

JD: Not a problem.

TW: Thank you, I hope you feel better soon as well.

JD: Thank you! I appreciate that so much. I hope I do too.

END OF INTERVIEW