

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

YSU History

Black Student Experience project

OH 2258

Brianna Triplett

Interviewed by

Tilisia Williams

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY  
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Interviewee: Brianna Triplett

Interviewer: Tilisia Williams

Subject: YSU History - Black Student Experience

Date: July 27, 2023

TW: This is an interview with Brianna Triplett for the Youngstown State University Project on the Black Student Experience. The interview is being conducted using Webex and today's date is July 24th, 2023. And my name is Tilisia Williams.

How are you, Miss Brianna?

BT: I'm good. How are you?

TW: I'm doing good. Let's start off with, where are you from? Where did you grow up?

BT: I'm from Youngstown, Ohio.

TW: What was it like growing up here in Youngstown, Ohio?

BT: I had a good experience. I'm from the North side of Youngstown, OH, which is very close to the University, so I grew up in the area. I went to private school for primary schooling and then went to public school for high school. And, although it's maybe not the richest area, I think I still had a good childhood.

TW: What do you remember specifically about your neighborhood and where you grew up that affected you the most?

BT: When I was a child, my neighborhood was around the Westlake Terrace apartments which were considered "projects" or [a] really bad housing area, so it did to kind of have negativity attached to it. It was very close to my home. It was torn down and replaced with what they call

the Arlington Heights area now. So if you're familiar with that area, that wasn't always there when I was a kid. Generally, I just stayed on my street. I wasn't really allowed to leave my street unless I was walking to school or something like that. But getting around the neighborhood, we would ride bikes as a kid and play in our areas.

TW: Are you a first-generation college student?

BT: Yes.

TW: What made you want to go to YSU?

BT: It was just close to home. I do have a great aunt who graduated from college, but other than that, I'm the only person in my family to attend, to have a bachelor's degree. She just encouraged me to stay close to home. It was very close to my house, somewhat walkable. So, I chose it because it was close to home. I never even considered going somewhere else.

TW: You have a bachelor's degree in nursing?

BT: Yes.

TW: What made you choose nursing? That's a really hard field! Most people don't stay in there long.

BT: Yeah, it was a very challenging program. Dr. [Nancy] Wagner is the president [Director]. I think she's going to be stepping down, but she was great. She was actually instrumental in helping me choose to stay at YSU. I thought maybe I should go an easier route, and go to St Elizabeth [Hospital], [that] had a program for an associate's degree. She encouraged me to stay and do the bachelor's program. My [great] aunt kind of told me that there were not a lot of fields that would be profitable after I graduate. She pretty much kind of said to stay in medical or in STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering, Math]. I considered computer science, and I considered pre-med, but I ultimately chose nursing and I'm happy with the decision.

TW: What was your first year of school like? What was your freshman year like?

BT: I started college originally when I was 17 because I graduated early, but I was not really successful the first time around. I didn't have a lot of guidance. I felt a little insecure because I had a GED, I didn't have all the experience that the other students who came from the suburbs

have. A lot of the programs that they had, we didn't have at my high school- which was Rayen High [School]. And I didn't even finish high school up there after they closed our high school. So, I felt a little insecure. One of my biggest barriers was trying to work and go to college at the same time. That's ultimately why I had to take a break and come back. I had just turned 18 years old. I was trying to pay for my own apartment and not live off of student loans. And I didn't have a car. I would have to walk to school, walk to work. It was so challenging. So, when I came back in 2012, I had to have to use some loans as assistance to be able to make it through nursing school because it was just impossible to live as an independent adult and attend university full time.

TW: Did you have any mentors or people who kind of guided you through those experiences? I know you mentioned Dr. Wagner, but were there any others?

BT: So, I had lived in a group home in foster care up until I turned 18. I lived with my great grandmother, and she died when I was 16 and I was in foster care until I was 18. There was a program called "Foster Care to Success" and they assigned me a mentor that would check on me every couple months. They would send me school supplies. They sent me a computer, scholarships. They really encouraged me to keep going. And looking back at it, I'm very, very grateful for those phone calls I would get to say, "Hey, we know it's hard. Keep going." So, I would say my Foster Care to Success team and my great-aunt, although she's elderly, she was very helpful in keeping me going through nursing school.

TW: Were you a part of any groups while you were a YSU student here?

BT: No.

TW: Were there any events that you enjoyed doing while you were here as a student?

BT: One thing I did get to do during my time at YSU was study abroad. I got to do a couple study abroad programs. So I did kind of participate in some of the students with the International Students Association. We would host coffee hour on Fridays. I would try to attend if I could. Nursing school was very demanding along with working, like as much as I could. So I wasn't in many social groups, but that would be the one I did go to.

TW: Describe your experiences with studying abroad. Did you get to leave the country? What is studying abroad?

BT: Studying abroad gives a student an opportunity to take college level courses in another country. Dr. Annette [El-Hayek] was the Director of Study Abroad at the time. I remember going to her office and she showed me a map of the world and she says, “Where do you want to go? I will bring you there.” And I said, well, as an African American, I never heard of any of us going to study abroad. I thought it was like for rich, privileged kids. It was nothing I had ever heard of before I even stepped into her office. I actually was just in Jones Hall one day and I saw all the flags. And I think that might have been how I met her. And she just said you can go anywhere you want to. So she kind of encouraged me. She's really, really outgoing with talking to students. She hosts students at her house. She was one of my biggest influences to study abroad.

TW: Where did you go when you studied abroad?

BT: I went to India.

TW: Was that experience like?

BT: It was shocking. I [had] only lived in Youngstown and Chicago, so I've never been outside of the U.S. I didn't know much about the world outside of my own hometown. I don't come from a family of people who are college educated or people who have really made it out of our city. So I really didn't have any of my family to look towards or encourage me or who even knew what India was or if it was a country or where it was.

TW: Were you on campus often when you were a YSU student?

BT: Only when I need to be. I lived off campus at home, or at my own apartment. So I only would come to YSU for classes or clinicals.

TW: With YSU being a predominantly white institution, did you go to any places where it was common for Black students to meet and be comfortable? A place that was theirs on campus?

BT: No. Now this is kind of back. I don't know how it is now. When I first attended college, it was like in 2008 and then I left and came back in 2012. So this is a long time ago, but no, not really. It is a predominantly white university and kind of looking back at it, it kind of saddens me. Because Youngstown, there's a lot of African Americans here and there was not a lot of engagement from YSU to our high schools. Like, I never ever saw someone come and engage at Rayen [High School] or Wilson [High School]. Although they were maybe considered “bad” high schools, but a lot of us had potential and there wasn't like a lot of engagement [from YSU] with our local schools. So there were some programs that they [YSU] had for African Americans, but I didn't really participate because I was very busy.

TW: What kept you motivated to stay on track during Nursing school at that time? Like I said, I was a nursing student before I switched to the major that I'm in now, and it was a very difficult program- especially being in the pre-nursing program. It is very pressure-inducing. How did you stay on track?

BT: It was difficult. As I said, I have a GED. I went to Rayen High School. I love my school. I love being from Youngstown and this side of town I'm from. But we just simply didn't have the same type of programs that the kids in Poland and Canfield and Boardman had. So, I remember coming to chemistry and biology, some of the kids were way ahead of me because of the opportunities that they had at their school that I did not. But I didn't want to fail. So I just kept going. Going to tutoring was something that was really motivating because it made me feel like I wasn't the only person in class that had no idea what was going on, you know? When I went to tutoring, I would see other kids and they were learning things about the periodic table or maybe biological processes. And as I said, it made me feel like I wasn't alone in learning it. And it was like every time I took a test and I got a good grade, I was ready for the next one, ready for the next one. I kind of liked that it was competitive to be in the nursing program because it made me work much harder to represent African Americans in the community. In the [nursing] program, I think that there was only like five African Americans out of over 100 nursing students in my graduating class. There was maybe only five of us...

TW: That being said, since the group of Black women within the pre nursing program or the nursing program in general was so small, did that give you a greater sense of pride when you finally got your degree in the end, even though it was a long journey to getting it?

BT: Yes, I was very happy. I still have a picture of all of us together in one picture, all of us girls who were Black- plus Miss Daniels who was the only Black nursing instructor in the program. We all took a picture together and she told us to be very proud of ourselves. I would also remember Miss Cynthia Daniels as a motivating person. She just pulled me aside and was like, "You're not in this alone. Anytime you need to come to my office, I'm here." I actually still talk to her to this day. She's a nurse practitioner in the city, and I don't think that there are any Black professors in the YSU Nursing program. So I'm sad that they lost her. But she was really great with working with the minority students.

TW: When you first came to school in 2008, in the early 2000s, YSU in general was going through a whole lot of changes. And even when you came back in 2012, YSU was still being built up and many things were being changed about the campus itself. What was the experience like when you came in 2008 versus when you came in 2012? Did you see any differences?

BT: I would say back in 2008, I was 17 when I started. I wasn't really paying attention to what was going on. I wasn't really aware. I was just kind of going to class, hanging out with friends. I was more focused on working and being independent, and school was an afterthought. When I came back, the nursing school is a four-year program. So I came in 2012 [and] I completed [my bachelor's degree] in 2016. I just did my four years- in and out. I was much more focused then. Any differences that I noticed then versus now? I can't really say. But I would say that when President [Jim] Tressel came [in 2014], I noticed that there was a bigger sense of having YSU pride, if that makes sense. I saw a lot of things changing at the University that made it beautiful on that, kind of made it a positive space. It was nice. He would even come to events for the International Students Association. It seemed like he was really involved in campus activities. I couldn't even tell you who our last President [was] before President Tressel. I couldn't even tell you his name. I never saw him. I don't remember him, you know? So, I guess maybe a change in president was for the good.

TW: When you first came in 2008, when you were about 17 years old, were you a nursing student at that time? Have you always wanted to be a nursing student?

BT: No, I was a fashion merch [merchandising] major.

TW: OK. And you said your great aunt influenced you staying in the medical field?

BT: Yeah, medical or STEM.

TW: Do you sometimes think about what your life would have been like had you pursued your original major? Or are you happy with the choice you made ultimately joining the nursing program?

BT: I'm happy with my choice to be a nurse. I think it's gave me a really good foundation for the rest of my life. It's a very stable field. I always have a job and I'm very happy to be an African American represented in the medical field because there needs to be more of us represented in the field. Do I think about fashion merchandising sometimes? Not really. I don't think that if I would have majored in that I would have been successful. It's not really one of those fields where you graduate after four years and you go get a really good job, you know? Maybe you might make it, maybe you won't. Sometimes you don't even need a major to make it in the fashion industry- whether you want to be a buyer or a designer. So I'm very happy with the guidance of my aunt to pick something in STEM or medical, and I'm happy with nursing. So she was right. Sometimes you don't always wanna listen to your parents. But she gave good advice, and I'm happy I listened.

TW: I know you said you didn't do much when you were a student because you were very busy, but did you feel connected to a larger community while you were at school? Like, did you participate in any volunteer work? Was there stuff outside of school that you did?

BT: Not really. I think back in my nursing school time, between 2012 and 2016, I was more involved in my church. So, when I wasn't doing things like working or studying, I would go to church and try to do small things with the church. I would volunteer, like with our children's usher ministry. Sometimes I would try to teach a Bible study class, something small like that, just to kind of participate. The church I belong to, Tabernacle Baptist Church, is a small church on the North side, but they try to engage a lot with children. And if you go to the church, you have to be active in something. So, during nursing school, even if it was something small, they wanted to keep me active in church. So that's what I did in my spare time.

TW: Do you still currently live in Youngstown?

BT: I'm a travel nurse, so I live in Youngstown. That's where my home base is. But as a travel nurse, you can go to a different place every few months. So I'm currently in New York.

TW: Being a travel nurse, especially in the past three years- since 2019 and everything with COVID- how did you deal or cope? Because school doesn't really prepare you to do a job like nursing. It may try to but once you actually get into the job, it's a totally different ball game. How have you coped in the last three years?

BT: I've been a nurse for about seven years, so I did have a little bit of practice under my belt from being a nurse in the past. COVID has had us taking care of sicker people with less staff, so it is put even the most senior nurses to be challenged in ways we have not been challenged before. I'm an emergency room nurse, so we see people when they're at their sickest- when they first come in the door. Especially working in New York, it is just by miles more challenging than working in Ohio. So I'm grateful for the foundation I had working a few years before I traveled. It gave me good experience. It doesn't make you perfect, but you're able to handle situations a little better and with more wisdom and knowledge.

TW: Are you still in connection with the other Black student nurses that you went to school with?

BT: Every once in a while, yes. There was just a couple of us. So I won't say we talk every day, but I followed them on social media. None of us work in the same [geographical] area. But if I

needed to call them, I would. They would remember me. I would remember them. So I'm not in contact with them, but I do follow them.

TW: You said you've been in the nursing field for almost seven years. Before being a travel nurse, did you have a stationed hospital that you worked in?

BT: I worked for Bon Secours Mercy Health. I worked there when I was a nurse tech while I was in nursing school and I worked there for a little bit after I graduated. I worked for a couple years there [after graduation]. I spent the next few times just kind of going around to different jobs to see what kind of niche I like. I discovered Emergency Room nursing. I started to do that. I did that for a couple years and then COVID happened, and I went off and started traveling. So yeah, I did work locally and then I just started to travel.

TW: Which one do you prefer? Do you prefer to work locally, stationary or do you prefer to travel nursing?

BT: I prefer the travel nursing.

TW: What were some of your best experiences in your career so far being a travel nurse?

BT: I think being able to work at top trauma hospitals. New York is one of the most populated states in our country. We have high acuity. We have a lot of diversity work. Being a travel nurse has allowed me to be exposed to a lot of different patient populations that I wouldn't be exposed to in my small town in Ohio. We see different types of people. We see a lot of different types of disease processes and it helps me become a well-rounded nurse. So I like that I was able to get out of my hometown and experience nursing in a different part of the country.

TW: We kind of touched on this a little bit, but do you feel like YSU, the institution itself, gave you the tools that you needed to adapt to being a nurse once you graduated?

BT: I think they did the best that they could within their limitations. As a nursing student you cannot typically do all of the nursing skills that you would do as a licensed nurse. In a lot of states, some nursing students are not even able to start IVs until after they graduate. So a lot of it is on the job training. They did the best that they could with taking us to clinicals and exposing us. The preceptorship was great. If I can change one thing, I wish we had more preceptorship time. I think we did like 120 [hours]. I wish we could do 240 [hours]. I wish we could do it over two semesters because you're working one-on-one with your nurse and you get to take up a

patient load. Versus when you're doing nursing clinicals, it might be like three of you taking care of one person. But in reality, when you're a nurse, like in New York, there's one of me taking care of seven ER patients. So you know, if you only had that clinical experience, you wouldn't be prepared for that in your first nursing job. So my only thing I would change is I wish we had more preceptorship time.

TW: You said when you went to high school, you went to Rayen [High School]. What was it like when your school shut down and it took away the stability for you? You still did graduate really early at 17 [years old]. Going to college at 17. What was that transition like and how did you become a YSU student giving that great barrier that you had?

BT: So when our school shut down, Rayen High School and Wilson High School closed. And the students were expected to go to the new East High or Cheney [High School], depending on where they lived. During that time frame is when my grandmother died and I ended up in foster care. So, I went to Cheney [High School] for a little bit. It's a kind of a long story, but I moved to Indiana with my mom. I guess you could say our home life was unstable and I could not attend high school in Indiana. So it was no failure of the Youngstown City school system. It was just something that happened in my personal life. So when I went to Indiana, I could not attend high school there, but I really wanted to graduate high school. So I told my mom, "Hey, I really want to graduate high school. I heard about something called Job Corps." [Job Corps] was in Chicago, which is kind of how I ended up there. So I moved around a lot in those couple years. I went to Job Corps. They said, "Hey, we can offer you a trade and we can offer you a high school diploma or a GED." I did the GED because it was easy. It was just a quick test to take. I was fresh out of high school, so it wasn't challenging. I wanna say I got my trade in like something in tech. You know, some type of computer tech thing. But when I took my GED test, I had just turned 17. So I graduated earlier than what I anticipated [if] I had it went had went to traditional high school. But I think because I didn't have a lot of great influences around me at that time when I went into college, I didn't really take it that serious the first time around. My family was more focused on get a job, take care of yourself, and survive. The education wasn't the priority, at least until my great aunt stepped in to guide me a different way.

TW: When you originally left college in 2008, was your great aunt the one who encouraged you to come back in 2012?

BT: Yes. I worked for a couple years. I mean, I think back then minimum wage was like \$7.30 an hour. You know, it was very hard to get by. I was working a lot. I could only walk. I couldn't afford a car. And she kind of just set me down, was like, "Is this the life that you want for the rest of your life?" There's a way that you can get out of poverty and you can take your education serious, she said. If you take your education serious, just kind of give it a couple years, you know. She kind of put it like this- You're going to live four years either way. Why don't you do

something with yourself? Make yourself better? She said. Your life could change. And I said, “Okay, I’m going to be a nurse. This is what I’m going to do.” I signed up in August of 2012, and four years later I graduated. I’m very happy. I wish that my brothers and sisters maybe, or other kids in my neighborhood would have went to college. Not to say that some of us didn’t, but a lot of kids in my neighborhood didn’t really take the college route. And you can see a huge difference in how my life is versus how their life is. Not that I’m any better than my friends that I grew up in my neighborhood with, but having an education in a good field can take you a long way. And, you know, the United States is the land of opportunity. There is absolutely no reason why anyone should not be flourishing. As a U.S. citizen, you know, education is accessible to everyone.

TW: Do you have any advice that you would like to give for young Black women at YSU who may not have that support system- who may not have those mentors or people who they can go to? Faculty who they can go to. What advice would you give to them?

BT: I would tell them to please start hanging around [good] people. My grandma always said “The company you keep determines the trouble you meet.” So I think it’s very, very important to hang around people who are going to encourage you to do better. Hang out with people who are already successful and then close your eyes and think about the life that you want five years from now and how you will get to it. How will you have a stable life? Stable money is better than fast money, you know? Sure you could braid hair. You could cut hair and make money real fast. But is that a stable income source? No. Your education will get you further than any of that. So I would just encourage them to hang around and try to get support from people who are already established. Maybe look to your Black faculty members.

One of the things that I really wish I would have did in my undergrad was join a Black sorority. Our Black sororities are D9 [Divine Nine] on our campus. I mean, I’m not saying that they weren’t there- they definitely were. But it’s not like how it is at a HBCU. They’re not out. I don’t know if they’re not allowed to properly engage... I know that they’ve stopped step shows from happening at YSU. I just wish that I had more engagement with the sororities, or if I had more knowledge about it. It’s not to say that they weren’t there. I just wasn’t engaged, and if I could go back in time, I would have loved to be around those kind of people. Cuz they’re all about elevating the Black community. Those are the people you need to be around. So I would encourage them to learn about D9 sororities and fraternities. Try to join if you can. Even if it’s not something that you can do, just get around a positive influence. And if you have to lose friends, that’s okay. I have some friends that she might have grown to the left. I’ve grown to the right. I’m not saying that I’m better than her, but people choose their life paths and you don’t have to follow them. Choose your own life path. And if you have to lose friends along the way, that’s okay.

TW: Thank you so much for contributing your time. I know you were busy before you came. I just wanted to say thank you for contributing to this research and to this project.

BT: If I could change a couple of things, I would like to see YSU engage more with the minorities in Youngstown. Youngstown is my city. That's how I feel. We have a lot of faculty members who drive through the suburbs with their doors locked, driving through Youngstown to avoid it just to get to the University. Do you know what I'm saying? It's like they're at YSU, but they're not *from* our city. They're not from our town. So I would just like to see more engagement because when you put on that YSU shirt, you're representing the city that you don't want to unlock your doors at, right? It offends me because those people that they are afraid of are my people. Those are my people walking up and down the street. I don't care if it's the poorest person or the rich person- that person represents me. I represent them, right?

So, I wish that I could see more engagement like at East High, at Cheney [High School], at our middle schools. Like, please send in the nursing students. Please send in the engineering students to give presentations, to give programs to encourage our children to choose the path of education. And the reason why I think that's needed is because our parents don't always do that. You know, I could say, like if I left it to my parents, they might have just said, "Hey, you don't really need to go to school. Just do what you want," right? But that's not the right advice to give a child. You need someone to tell them that, hey, having an education will make your life better. And unfortunately, a lot of children in Youngstown are in broken homes and it's not their fault. So I wish I could see people from YSU engage more in the community and encourage our people to come to the University. The fact that YSU is a predominantly white university in a Black town is just completely insane. You know, it should at least be equal. So I really hope to see more people who look like me attend [the] University and value education. I don't want anyone to say "Oh, we have Youngstown Early College." I know Youngstown Early College exists, but I want to see more engagement. Whatever you're doing, double it. Triple it! Because our city needs Youngstown State and Youngstown State needs our city.

TW: Yeah, that what projects like this are for. And so I genuinely want to thank you again for your participation. And if you know anybody else who would like to participate, you could always email us. If you have any questions, you could always email us. We're opening up an exhibit. Hopefully at the beginning of 2024 sometime. But if you'd like to come and see your contributions and the contributions of others just like you, then we would love to have you.

BT: I would. I don't know if you know Susan Moore? She is the Assistant Director of Diversity.

TW: Yes.

BT: Do you know her?

TW: Yes, I do. I see her every day.

BT: I love her! Tell her Bri said hi. I used to work at YSU for like a hot minute. So, she'll know exactly who I am. If you haven't interviewed her, [you should] interview her. She's fabulous. Cynthia Daniels, if you can get in contact with her. Do you know her?

TW: I do not, but we could try reaching out to her.

BT: Yeah, she used to be a professor- the only Black professor at YSU in the Nursing program. So I think she would be a great person because I only can give you my point of view. She could kind of give you that global point of view of minorities as a whole in the nursing program. I'm trying to think of who else. Those are the two people that that I can come on. Miss Moore is great. I didn't meet her until years after I graduated, but I was so happy I did. I wish I'd known her all along. So, she was another great one. I think she used to attend my church as well. Those are the two people that I can think about. But yeah, I love this project. I can't wait to see what you guys come up with. I think it's really important that African Americans have a voice. Because as I said, this is our town. This is my city. You know what I mean? This is my place and I think we should have representation.

TW: Thank you.

#### END OF INTERVIEW

Text contributed by Brianna Triplett after interview:

Growing up in poverty it's really hard to see yourself attending university because it's really hard to provide for yourself and attend university. My statement doesn't represent every family in Youngstown, but there are a lot of us who may be the first person in our family to graduate college. We don't have any family members who are college educated that we can look towards. Sometimes when you grow up in a bad environment, you end up becoming it. That's why it's so so important that the students are encouraged from the time they are in grade school and high school to attend a university. It really changed my life and I hope something I said today can change someone else's! I know it can be really hard. I've been at the bottom of the barrel. I found myself in a homeless shelter at 18 years old, but if I can do it they can do it!

We did a clinical while I was in nursing school, and we went to "Daybreak" which is a youth homeless shelter on the Southside of Youngstown. It was a really good experience because I used to LIVE in that homeless shelter for teenagers when I was a kid. It was really nice to be able to go back and explain to some of the kids that I used to be in the same position as them. I

wish that the university we could do more things like that – get into those places whether it be the classroom or the youth homeless shelters – to encourage people to come to the university get an education and make a better future for themselves.

I'm not sure what the university is doing now. But maybe they could do something like give presentations inside of classrooms at the city schools like East and Cheney. I think it would be nice for other African-American students to talk to the students in the inner city. Sometimes children and teenagers are more likely to listen when they hear advice coming from someone that looks like them. I know that it's hard for non-minorities to understand, but it really is helpful.