

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

YSU History

Black Student Experience project

OH 2259

KIM CLARK FORD

Interviewed by

TILISIA WILLIAMS

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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Interviewee: Kim Clark Ford

Interviewer: Tilisia Williams

Subject: YSU History - Black Student Experience

Date: September 8, 2023

TW: This is an interview with Dr. Kim Ford for the Youngstown State University Project on the Black Student Experience. This interview is being conducted using Webex. Today's date is September 8, 2023 and my name is Tilisia Williams. Hello Mrs. Ford!

KF: Hello!

TW: How are you?

KF: I am doing okay. And yourself?

TW: I'm doing nice, thank you. Let's first start with where you're from- where'd you grow up?

KF: So, that depends on how you define where I'm from. I was born in Minnesota, grew up in Indiana, did my [undergraduate] college and medical school in Ohio, did [medical] residency in Pennsylvania then Illinois for [graduate] fellowship. Not the answer you were expecting, was it?

TW: Yeah, I was more so talking about where did you spend your childhood and high school years?

KF: Childhood was, for the most part, in Indianapolis.

TW: What was that experience like? Growing up in Indianapolis?

KF: It was fine. I was on the North side, so Washington Township schools. So, I wasn't in IPS [Indianapolis Public Schools] as far as public schools [go]. It was still a public school, but it wasn't Indianapolis Public Schools. It was [Metropolitan School District of] Washington Township. When I was there, my high school was ranked as number one in the state overall, so it was a little different in that perspective. But otherwise, it was overall normal. It was a very large school, there were like 3,000 kids in the high school.

TW: Wow. Why did you decide to come to Ohio to get a college degree?

KF: Originally I was enrolled in NEOUCOM [Northeastern Ohio Universities College of Medicine- now the Northeast Ohio College of Medicine], the BS MD program. And then while I was there, I discovered osteopathy, which I didn't even know was a thing. And so I was like "well, this is why I wanted to go into medicine." [I] left NEOUCOM and just hoped I would be able to get into OUCOM [Ohio University College of Medicine] and here we are.

TW: Why did you ultimately choose YSU when you specifically wanted to study, um...what is it called again?

KF: Its a BS-MD program where you get, in theory, your undergraduate [degree] and MD [degree] in six years [instead of 7+]. And the only three colleges that were in that program for NEOUCOM were Kent [State University], [University of] Akron, and YSU. And I got in to YSU.

TW: What was your experience like coming from Indianapolis to Ohio to go to school? What was that first year of school like?

KF: For NEOUCOM [BSMD program], you start in the summer. So we started in early July I want to say. It was a long time ago. It was pretty lonely initially, because there wasn't really anybody else there. There were some of the athletes, there was my program and other than that nobody was there for the most part until September or whatever. I was six hours away from home, no vehicle.

TW: How did you find yourself adapting to being alone in another state?

KF: I don't think I started work study [employment on campus] until Fall [semester]. We were still on quarters then, not semesters. I don't think it was until Fall quarter that I started that. I worked for the residence hall at the front desk. I made more friends that way, in the sense that I knew everybody- knew all of the residents, all of their family, friends when they would come, security [employees]. A lot of times because of the way my schedule fell out, I would work the 6pm or 7pm until midnight shift. And when I was living off campus, the campus cops would drive me home. So I knew a lot of people that way.

TW: Are you a first-generation college student?

KF: Sort of, not really. My mom, when I was in elementary/middle school got her associates [degree], but other than that on her side of the family I was [the first]. And then my dad, he didn't go to college, but his dad did- which is really cool in and of itself. So tangentially related to this, my dad's dad was actually born in 1875. So his parents and some of his siblings were slaves. And he actually went to college and was a teacher and had integrated classrooms because he taught the blind.

TW: That's really interesting. Is he one of your motivations for ultimately deciding to go to college as well?

KF: Actually no, 'cause I didn't even find my father again until I was 16 [years old] and so I had already decided what I was going to do by then. But no, I just always knew I wanted to help

people and my school counselors and pretty much everybody... There wasn't a you're-not-going-to-college choice... Unless I was going to really buck the system, they were like "You're going to go [to college], duh!"

TW: Once you got to college, you mentioned that you had worked in the residence hall and that's how you met a lot of people, made a lot of friends. Did you meet any mentors? Or were there any faculty on campus that helped you throughout your college years?

KF: Yes, so NEOUCOM had a coordinator on campus, Mrs. [Linda] Krieger who kind of helped me somewhat. And then I had dated/was engaged to one of the RAs. He was an upper classman if you will, so there was that. And then Mr. Blake, who I think Rashada [Alexander] told you about. He did the Alpha Kappa Mu. But that was later- that was like my last year or two that I was there.

TW: How did you meet Ms. Rashada Alexander?

KF: How did we meet? So, she was in the University Scholars- that was the name of the program she was in, I think.

TW: Yeah.

KF: So they were held to a similar [academic] standard as NEOUCOM was, but you couldn't be in NEOUCOM and be a University Scholar. But we got to know them a lot. There weren't a lot of minority people that were there initially, outside of Athletics. And we're both, as you can tell, a little goofy, so we hit it off that way.

TW: You both pioneered and started a scholarship called "Help A Sister Out." How did that come about?

KF: As you know, being in school is a hard kind of broke. Especially in December when you know you got to pay room and board and school fees and all that stuff for winter quarter. Which I don't know if you guys do if the semester starts in January now. When you also had to pay rent and what not, but student loans didn't come in until January. And people would be like "oh well what can we do to help?" You can donate to the "Help A Sister Out Foundation, that's what you can do!" And we joked about that and then we both got big girl jobs, we were both like "well, why don't we do it?"

TW: How did that process go, starting that scholarship from your perspective?

KF: It was a little rough initially, because neither of us are there [at YSU]. So, who do we talk to? What do we fill out? How do we do this? And over the last few years, Rashada took over that which I'm very excited about. She wrote a mission statement and all the things and I'm like "you go!" because that is not in my ministry. Once we got it started, it was a matter of trying to keep track of who we needed to send the money to because it would change as staff moved on and what not. And then we had Dr. Lovelace who was kind of figuring out who the beneficiary would be. 'Cause we wanted someone who was an African American female in STEM [Science

Technology Engineering and Mathematics] to decide who was going to get it, and neither of us really had the time to look at applications and all that jazz.

TW: Your career right now is a physician. Am I correct?

KF: Yep!

TW: Can you go into a little more detail about what you do on a day-to-day basis?

KF: I'm an osteopathic family physician. I also have my certification in hospice and family medicine. I did a fellowship in women's health. Eventually I'm hoping to transition to all hospice. It's my dream. I love hospice, but I feel like you have to see the breadth of disease before you can really do it justice, which unfortunately with the way the medical field has gone, you can't even do that anymore. Today [I] was seeing [a patient with] back pain, doing manipulation, doing a pre-op [operation] physical for someone who's going to have a procedure done- bread and butter kind of stuff.

TW: When did you make the decision that you wanted to be in the medical field and be a physician?

KF: When I was in 7th or 8th grade I talked to my school counselor because she was trying to guide how you set up high school classes and all that jazz. And I was like "well, I think I want to be a psychologist". And she was like "No, you're smart enough. You should be a psychiatrist." And I was like "well, okay, whatever" and so I just geared my classes and whatnot that way. And the more I learned about it, it fit me and what I wanted- especially once I found out about osteopathy. That's kind of where it led. I decided relatively early on I did not want to be a psychiatrist, because being [a] family practice [physician], about a third of my practice is psych-related in some way, shape, form, or fashion. And I take home enough of it with just a third of my practice that way. I did not want to do that all day.

TW: Your major...

KF: Was initially combined science- chemistry, and then became biology.

TW: Okay, why did you change it? I wanted to ask but she [Cassie Nespor] also puts questions up here [on Webex chat] as well, so I'm sorry if I get distracted.

KF: That's fine. Its like "pop up! Squirrel!"

TW: & KF: *laughing*

KF: Anyway, so for NEOUCOM [BS/MD program] pretty much everybody is combined science-chemistry when they come in. When I decided to leave NEOUCOM, instead of combined science, I wanted either chemistry or biology. And I only had to have about three more classes for my chemistry [major]. But those classes were inorganic chemistry, physical chemistry, and

another like way high one. And I was like “No, I'll do bio. Thanks!” And so I had an extra two or three quarters with the biology stuff and I was like “That's okay. I'm good. I'll do that.”

TW: Why did you leave the NEOUCOM program?

KF: Because it's MD. It's allopathic. And I wanted to be a DO [Doctor of Osteopathy]. Their philosophy suits more of why I was going into medicine. You know, the whole holistic philosophy: mind, body, spirit- that whole thing. And in osteopathy you learn manipulation. I had a patient come in today who could not extend her neck at all because her neck hurt so bad. The muscles were locked up. She couldn't rotate very far. She saw the nurse practitioner yesterday, who had started her on meds. But I did manipulation on her today, and she has another 10 to 15 degrees of rotation either way, and another 5 to 10 degrees of extension within that 20-minutes between when she came in and when she left- without drugs.

TW: What's wonderful! That's cool. What was it that you like more about osteopathy compared to traditional medicine?

KF: The holistic view. None of us go into medicine to be a drug dealer. But a lot of times that's where we end up. And you know, someone comes in and you're like, “Oh, let me just throw a pill at it and we'll see how it goes.” And by all means, there's a time and a place for that. Absolutely. I do it every day. But I want to treat the whole person. And just because I can make the surveys or the questionnaire or the labs perfect, doesn't mean I'm treating the patient.

TW: In the BS/MD program were there many other Black students who looked like you on those programs?

KF: There were a few. The year I was in there, there were three of us. And two of us ended up leaving and doing something totally different. I think Eva still went through. I don't know if she went all the way through or not. But Phyllis and I both left. We both went into STEM, but we didn't do BS/MD. Phyllis was one of the “Three Musketeers”, if you will, between me and Shada [Rashada] and Phyllis.

TW: So being a STEM major here at YSU, there are not a lot of people within those majors who look like us, to keep it simple. How do you build a community within your interest in education when there's not a lot of people who look like you?

KF: Like most things for people who look like us, you have to do the same thing in a very different way. So, whereas in NEOUCOM, my white colleagues, my Asian colleagues, they had a lot of people that looked like them. They had a lot of professors that looked like them. So it wasn't as difficult [for them]. There were a couple of us that were in NEOUCOM and so the three of us were kind of that way. But then outside of that, it was looking either in other majors or looking in other groups. So now you have the opportunity of Zoom learning and Facebook and all that kind of stuff- and that wasn't really something we had then. And so Rashada was not in the same major as me, but we had some classes together even though we were a year apart. We had a couple of things together, but most of what we had in common was not

school- as far as like studying together for this test or that test. It was more the fact that we looked alike- or similar-ish. And there's always that balance of sharing similarities but also having differences. And I laughed good, long, and hard when she saw snow for the first time and she was so excited and thought it was the best thing ever, and I'm like, "You just wait. Give it another week. You won't think it's so wonderful." And she didn't! And when her mom called and left us a voice mail on the actual answering machine – because we had an actual answering machine – and she was like "Where is you at in the snow?" 'cause she was still back in Alabama! And I laughed for days about that. We still laugh about that 20 years ago. But it's a matter of looking outside of the main path that you see and finding other things that you're interested in. Shada, she did theater a lot when she was there [at YSU]. She still has a lot of friends that were in that arena there. So, its a matter of looking outside the obvious sources, because the things you need support with in college, sometimes its a particular major, sometimes its a particular professor, but usually its just life. How do you get food? Pay bills? Buy books? Where do you go when you have to go somewhere? Where is a good place to get greens [vegetables]- like that is a thing! There was one place that was right next to Saint Elizabeth's Hospital and they had soul food. It wasn't there for real long. But I would walk – not from Cafaro house, it was a little further than that – and I would walk there 'cause I was like I need sumthin'. I need comfort food. I need mac n' cheese that is not from the box – although I love the box, don't get me wrong – and you know, some times when you need that.

TW: Yeah, most definitely. Being a STEM major, especially in biology, that takes up a lot of your time and it consumes your life. And like you just said, to build a community of people who look like you are, people you feel comfortable around, you have to find other things that you are interested in. What other things outside of what you are learning specifically, did you have interest in?

KF: I was in marching band for the first year. I was a flag. It was the only sport I ever did. Now I'm a baseball mom and I'm like "What is this madness?" So, there was that. And then there was a lot of diversity working the front desk, so it's mostly that. And we would go out dancing a lot because sometimes you just need to blow off steam. So there were a couple different places that we would go. We wouldn't go out to date. We would just go out to just dance and blow off steam and get sweaty. But we had to time it right because that was when you could still smoke in the clubs, and so you had to be able to do your hair the next day. So you didn't spend the next week smelling like smoke. Something you probably have not ever had to deal with?

TW: Yeah, I'm still too young to get into any clubs. I'm not old enough yet. Which dorms did you work at?

KF: Cafaro [House], Lyden [House], Kilcawley [House], Wick [House].

TW: So you worked at all of them?

KF: Yep!

TW: Would you say that places like working the front desk at the dorm or doing small things like going out and dancing and stuff like that, do you feel like that brought extra support to you as a student?

KF: Yes. I'm going to tell you a story and there's a reason why I'm telling you this story. When I got married, I had just finished with my fellowship nine months before that. And when I got married, I told my husband who is in no way, shape, form, or fashion in the medical field, that his job now is to help remind me that there's more to life than medicine. Because it will suck you in and take everything else. So, I think all of those things helped provide some balance [at YSU] so that I didn't become so funneled in that I didn't live life. Because at this age [in college], it's all about living life and figuring out who you are and what you want and where you want to be and who do you want to be, instead of who people have told you you should be. And so all of those things helped me figure out who I wanted to be. Working the front desk especially because like the cleaning crew, the maintenance crew, security, I got to know all of them. And like I said, outside of athletics, as far as the next generation before me, most of the people that I saw [on campus] that looked like me were in those groups. I mean there was Dr. [Sherri] Lovelace and Mr. [William] Blake. Dr. [Victor] Wan-Tatah in Religious Studies. That's most of them that I remember. I will say, one of the things I didn't say before, is with NEOUCOM they did have a minority support in Yvonne, I believe was her name. (I can still remember that this long ago! I have no idea why.) And so she would meet with me, Phyllis, and Eva, and she would take us out for lunch, brunch, whatever, once a month. And we would just talk about what is this? What is that? And sometimes she'd have physicians come and talk to us, but mostly it was just a touch stone of stability so that we could see someone who looked like us. She was not a physician, but she did work in retention at the school at NEOUCOM, not at YSU.

TW: A little bit ago, you were speaking about this is the time in your life where it's like you struggle to become what you want to be and not what other people want you to be. You sound like you were pretty sure about what you wanted to do, but was there ever any time where you struggled with is this really what I want to do? Am I doing the right thing? Going on the right path?

KF: In undergrad- No. Later? Yes, absolutely. In undergrad, not really. But it wasn't so much professionally that I was talking about, as much as the other stuff that makes you a person. You know? How close do you want to be to people? What kind of relationships do you want to be to people? How much of a rule-follower are you? How much do you let ethics versus law decide what you do? Because sometimes it's easier to do things the easy way and not the ethical way. A lot of times in college where that option gets presented, and you're like "Who am I really? What am I going to choose to do?" So, it's kind of that personhood instead of professional that I was talking about.

TW: OK, so how did you go about finding out the kind of person you were outside of wanting to be a position [profession]?

KF: Part of that was who I chose to associate with because there were opportunities to associate with people who didn't have necessarily the same drive that I did. And you know, times when you could decide I'm just not going to do my homework. I'm going to go do this and such. And don't get me wrong, I did that a time, or three, or more – but whatever! But most of the time you, you have to weigh the benefit long-term versus the benefit short-term. 'Cause there's some times you do need to decompress, and that's more important than studying for that test. But then there's other times where you know, you *got* to study for the test. Like there's no other option. And who I chose to associate with when I was working the front desk. Some of the cops that would drive me home and what not, they knew who I was, what I was about. There was one, bless his heart, he knew I was going to be there over Thanksgiving 'cause I couldn't get home. And he's like "Why don't you come spend Thanksgiving with me and my family and hopefully my daughter will learn from you!" And I was like "I don't know if I want that kind of pressure. I'm just sayin.'" But it's that kind of thing where you build your web with people that you know you can lean on. And being as light as I am, I could pass [as white] to a certain extent, as long as my hair was up. And you know, did I want to take the easy way out? Did I want to say "Yes, I'm African American. This is what I'm going to claim?" Or am I going to say, "Well, I'm mixed" and lean more towards the white side or just go that way entirely. And that in some circumstances may have made things easier. But I also wouldn't have felt that I was being true to myself.

TW: Did you ever, just in general not just in college, struggle with being bi-racial and trying to figure out which identity you wanted to associate with in society?

KF: Yes! Frequently! Growing up in the [19]80s there wasn't a lot of bi-racial [people] from where I was. So, it was very much [I was] "too white" for the Black kids, "too Black" for the white kids. You know, everybody has their thing that they remember being traumatized by being called when they're younger, four eyes or whatever. For me, it was like zebra, Oreos, salt and pepper, all that stuff – before that was a cool [singing] group. And so that was a thing. I remember it was 6th grade. My mom was talking to me about this the other day. I came home off the bus crying, heaving and sobbing, saying, "Why did you have me? Why did you do this to me? You knew it would be hard [being mixed]!" Now I'm like that was a rite of passage. But now I'm on the flip side of it [as a parent] because my husband is white. So, my son could absolutely pass [as white] if he wanted to. He, at the moment, doesn't want to. But when there was the whole [George] Floyd [murder] situation [in May 2020], at one point we were trying to talk to him about that and he was really upset about it. Like wrote his first poem about it and the whole thing. So, we talked to him about if someone came up to you and just said "Hey, what are you?" what would you say? He said, "I would say I'm white 'cause I don't want to get killed". And he was eight [years old] at the time? Seven or eight? Seven! He was seven at the time. So dealing with it from that perspective of "oh, well...what do I do with this?" because I still have to talk to him about it. And now he's like, "Oh, I'm Black and mixed" and he kind of leans more towards that side. But being able to get him comfortable. And I told him if you want to say "I'm white" and just roll with that, that's your choice. It's your body. It's your life. You can

choose how you want to do that. So, I'm looking at the flip side of it [as a parent] now. I mean I'm pretty comfortable with who I am now but now I'm trying to deal with who he wants to be.

TW: You were very busy in college, but throughout your college career, the only job that you really mentioned working is the front desk. How did you pay for school? How did you get through it financially?

KF: So my main job was work study with the front desk. But I also I got maxed out on loans and Pell Grants and all that stuff. I couldn't get parent loans because my mom didn't qualify and to be honest, I couldn't rely on her to pay it back anyway. But I also worked at other stuff. For the last year, year and a half or so, that I was there I also worked for the YWCA. I don't know if it's still just across the street, but that was where it was. I worked with grants, with [Susan G.] Komen [breast cancer support organization], doing mammograms and getting people signed up, and social work kind of stuff with that. And then I ran a Lupus support group.

TW: What was that like, running the Lupus support group? That's really interesting.

KF: Well, it was a learning curve, I'll tell you that cause I didn't know anything about lupus when I started it. Or not started it, I shouldn't say that, when I started working there. Both of those things helped me be who I am now. You know very much a treating the patient versus treating the labs. Looking at the whole picture. You know, things like when members of the group had Raynaud's [syndrome which affects blood flow to your fingers] and so they couldn't make meatballs or meatloaf or any of that kind of stuff – which, as you know, in that particular area of Ohio is a thing. Like you have to do that. And so, you know, learning that they would put winter gloves on and then put dishwashing gloves over it so that they could mix the meat so their fingers didn't get frostbite. And having to kind of figure out workarounds to everyday things that their doctors were like, “Well, we don't know!”

TW: Wow. How did you balance out going to school full time and trying to get your degrees and everything and working and leading and being a part of all these different programs? For me, it's like when I got a \$50 late bill, I had a panic attack. I couldn't imagine being a biology student and having to worry about all of this stuff on your own, on top of the fact that you work all these jobs and all this stress. How did you deal with that?

KF: Well, that was a learned skill as well. I got very good at, not that I'm saying this is the best answer, figuring out work arounds [to save money]– generics, that kind of stuff. I wish I could take credit for coming up with this, but I totally did not. You know, getting to the point when creditors were calling and they're like, “Well, we'll put this on your credit report!” What you gonna do, staple some stuff to it? My credit was crap. That's what it was. And I have been blessed enough that I'm not in that position anymore, but we all know the people who don't have the trials and tribulations with finances as much. But that wasn't the life I led.

TW: Do you feel as though YSU helped to prepare you for what you currently do now? You mentioned a lot of situations and a lot of jobs, a lot of different things that you went through

throughout college that helped to make you the person you are now. But as far as career wise, do you feel like YSU prepared you?

KF: Sort of. So it was when I was there [at YSU] that I learned about osteopathy. It was just one of those, if you feed them, they will come [event] kind of things. And it was a meeting, and I was like, sure, whatever. I don't know what this thing is, but whatever. And I learned about it [osteopathy] and that chance dinner meeting changed the entire trajectory of my life - and my husband's and my son's, and my mom's. So, yes. Do I think it prepared me the way it meant to? Maybe not. There were a lot of professors- Dr. [Victor] Wan-Tatah, Dr. [Aurora] Sebastiani- they went to great lengths to teach you the knowledge, but they also taught you not how to think so much, but where to get the information so that you could make an informed decision. Which I think is, to a certain extent, the bigger job of a lot of education. Because a lot of the stuff that I learned in medical school, some of it [is] totally not even applicable now. But knowing where to find the information, and having a breadth of knowledge to be able to say this isn't important, this is really important, and this can lead to changes down the road. I think is key.

TW: Do you have any other advice that you would like to provide for any of the students? Students like me will be doing research on this years and years and years from now and they come across Dr. Kim Ford and her interview. What would you say to them?

KF: Never let anybody tell you who you are. Whether it's your culture, your hair, your skin, your job, your gender. All of that, you can find a way to surpass. It does not have to limit you in any way. But if someone wants you to succeed or to be accepted or whatever at the expense of who you think you are as a person or who you want to be, walk away; cause that is not a space you want to be in. And that no matter how many people accept you, if you don't accept yourself, you'll never feel welcome. The world and the environment has changed a lot now. I mean I distinctly remember the first time I saw a bi-racial couple on a [TV] commercial because that [speaking of openly bi-racial couples in public] didn't happen. And it was when I was in medical school. So it wasn't even when I was in college.

TW: Wow!

KF: So, I mean, I know it seems like things haven't changed, but they've changed, you know?

TW: Yeah.

KF: So, no matter where you are, you'll always be you. And you can change you, if you decide you want to. But never sacrifice who you are, what you believe, or the people you love – family, friends, lovers, whatever – because of what you look like, what they look like, or what the world says.

TW: Thank you so much for that advice. And thank you for providing your time for this project. I know you're really busy, but thank you for taking the time for us.

KF: Thank you! Good luck. And yeah, have fun with this because I hated research. Statistics was literally my least favorite class. I still have track marks up and down my back from where it ran me over!

TW: Oh yeah, I could totally agree. I'm a psychology major, so everything I do is research and stats.

KF: I'm not the one, the two, or the three for that!

TW: Thank you so much.

KF: No problem. Take care. Bye-bye.

TW: Thank you. You too.

END OF INTERVIEW