

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

YSU History

Black Student Experience project

OH 2262

Jennifer Roller

Interviewed by

Tilisia Williams

on

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Interviewee: Jennifer Roller

Interviewer: Tilisia Williams

Subject: YSU History - Black Student Experience

Date: July 14, 2023

TW: This is an interview with Jennifer Roller for the Youngstown State University project on the Black Student Experience. This interview is being conducted using Webex. Today's date is July 14th, 2023, and my name is Tilisia Williams.

Hello Mrs. Roller. Would you prefer I call you something else?

JR: You may call me Jennifer, Tilisia, please.

TW: Okay. Hello, how are you?

JR: I'm doing well. How are you?

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

JR: Yes, born and raised in Youngstown, Ohio.

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

JR: It was pretty amazing. I have a pretty close-knit family, good friends. I started school in the East side of Youngstown in Youngstown City Schools. But, in fourth grade, we moved over to the North side. So that was an interesting experience. It was kind of an impressionable age to make new friends in fourth grade, but it worked out alright. Other than that, just typical. Typical playing outside, going to school, hanging out with friends, sleepovers... All the cool, fun stuff that I don't know that the kids do anymore.

TW: Are you a first-generation college student in your family?

JR: I am.

TW: What was that experience like being a first generation? Did you feel more pressured to complete school?

JR: I don't know that I felt more pressured. My family was really proud. I think the experience was more like everything was a first. I did have an older sister who started [college] and went the career route after her first year. So, I did have the introduction to FAFSA, but most things—ACT, ACT prep, even the decision to not live on campus – all of that was brand-new for me and the entire family. I think that was a bit of a challenge, or a barrier, not having someone come before me to lay out the plan, or a path that I could follow. Other than that, I think that I figured it out. I had close friends and a good network of at least one other person. We did a lot of the navigating through our first year, at least, together.

TW: Do you feel like the networks and the friends that you had contributed to overcoming the hurdles of being a first-generation college student, having to learn everything on your own?

JR: Yeah, absolutely so. What I think is interesting, my best friend went to YSU also, but didn't continue. My now best friend – Lynn — her best friend didn't continue either. We knew each other from high school, but we weren't tight. We found each other at YSU and really looked out for each other and supported each other. We took the same classes. We shared books. Our

major was the same. So, I'd say absolutely, in terms of my ability to persist, it was in large part having someone to go along with me- even a peer, not a family member. Together, I think we figured a lot of it out.

TW: What made you choose YSU?

JR: I think because I was first-generation. No one else had gone, much less gone away to school. We didn't have much money, so I did go on grants. You know, I saw your list of questions and I was like, "I don't even think that was presented to me as a possibility, of going anywhere but YSU." Which is kind of interesting too, because I was pretty bright – in honors classes and the like – so that nobody presented that to me as an option. You know like, a guidance counselor [saying], "Here are your scholarships." That was not presented as an option.

TW: What was your journey finding different grants? Did you only pay your tuition with grants, or did you also have scholarships?

JR: Back at that time, I graduated high school in '86. Your grants actually covered your tuition and your books. So, I went primarily with grants, with some left over. I did get scholarships. I wouldn't say it wasn't a real one, but it was not merit necessarily. It was the MLK scholarship. You didn't even have to apply. The financial aid office... I don't know how they determined it. It seemed like a whole bunch of us got it. So it was like, "Okay, you're still here. You're doing well enough." I should look into that sometime, but yeah, my grants were enough to cover. Because I lived at home, I didn't have many expenses beyond that. My very last year, I needed a car. I did take out one student loan for \$5000 to get myself a used car to make sure I could get back and forth my last year. That was the only student loan, thankfully. The only debt I incurred. Looks a lot different now. God bless you all.

TW: What was your first year like here at YSU?

JR: It was scary. They had a program, Students Supporting Students. I think it was SSS. But anyway, they match you up with someone [for] your first day. You did a tour and you walked around. It was an orientation of sorts. I came down for that.

And then I had my schedule. I remember someone had suggested [to] find all your classes before your first day. So I remember taking that advice. My boyfriend at the time was several

years older, he was a senior when I was a freshman. I forgot about that. So, I also used some of his hints and clues about how to do it. He's like, "Don't wait until the day of [classes]. You'll be lost." I was very nervous, and you know, YSU is not even a large campus. It was bigger than a high school, so I was very nervous about not being able to find my way to my classes. I remember having a class in Cushwa, which those numbers still were the most confusing ever. You'd get all the way to a hallway, "Where did the numbers go?" I remember that being a bit of a challenge.

I pretend to be an extrovert is what I tell people now. Back then, I was just a plain 'ole introvert. So, I really wasn't comfortable (even in high school) with the changing of classes, with all those people out at once. I remember I used to be late to class, because I would let things settle down a bit before I wanted to navigate the campus. That was a challenge, just the mere social aspect.

Academics were fine. I do remember not feeling completely comfortable because I attended Youngstown City Schools, which was predominantly Black, and YSU is predominantly white. My very first psychology class, I was in a lecture hall—the big one in DeBartolo [Hall]. I remember being one of literally a handful of Black students. By the end of the quarter, there were like two of us left. I remember that being a culture shock, to not see anyone who looked like me. Like now, it's more of like, the professors or teachers, "Oh, no one looks like me." It was like, no, *nobody* looks like me. So, that was a big deal and a big transition. I do recall Kilcawley Center, like when you walk in the door from the street, that's where the Black students used to hang out. I remember finding some of my people there.

Years later, when I started working at YSU as a professional, after graduation, I remembered that. I used to use that as a tool to go get kids to engage them in the Center for Student Progress. So, my discomfort was not-for-not. It helped inform me years later. You can engage people in a different way.

TW: What made you pick psychology as a major?

JR: I think it was my friend. I think that was what she wanted to major in, and I didn't have any real ideas about anything different. I remember thinking it was broad enough that I could use it. I also thought that I wanted to be a psychologist, but I had no idea what that meant, really. You can't do that with a psychology degree, I mean, it's a baseline or foundation. I remember finding out much later, "Wait, I got to keep going?" So, I was ill-informed, but I guess it worked out. It was general enough that I could have some avenues in terms of post-graduate work.

TW: Someone I interviewed before was also, before she changed her major, she was a psychology major. She mentioned that, in one of her first classes, she remembers being called

out by the professor. She was put in a position where she had to represent the entire Black community, being that she was the only Black person in the classroom. You've mentioned that there were a lot of classes you went into, like the big lecture hall, where you were the one of very few Black people. Have you ever felt like you were in that position; where you felt like you had to represent your entire race? Even if everybody didn't feel like you?

JR: Yeah, professors would. I don't think that happened to me in psychology [classes], because I was in Cushwa Hall, so I'm not sure if that was like [classes for my] undergrad minor, but I remember, more than once, a professor looking at [me] like, my last name was Shivers at the time, "Miss Shivers, why don't you tell us blah blah blah?" So, it's very intimidating and nerve-wracking. Back then, at that kind of young age, you don't even know that you can say no. You don't even know that you can put that back on them. I don't even remember how I responded, quite honestly. Knowing me, I probably tried to respond as if. I do remember that happening to me before. I think too, on the one hand, it's like what a position to put a student. What I know now, I don't remember enough to know if it was ill-will, but I'm guessing it probably wasn't. It was like their way of trying to be inclusive, or "I have some diversity here, let me try to take advantage of it." But it was just the wrong way to go about it.

TW: Earlier you mentioned, in your freshman year, being a part of a program called "Students Supporting Students." Do you feel like that contributed to your networks while you were a freshman here?

JR: Nope. Do they still have SOAR [Student Orientation, Advisement, and Registration]? I guess it was the precursor to SOAR. You came down, you did your tour. We still used to register for our classes. It used to be on big screens – and you'd have your book, you'd have your sheet, and you write your classes in. They help navigate that, but it was like a one-and-done. I think they did leave the door open, like, "Oh, you should come see us," and they would send you postcards. But again, because YSU was not, is not diverse, the folks there didn't look like you either. There wasn't any connection.

I came from Youngstown City Schools, so, there's not that many city schools. How hard is to make sure, "Oh so and so came from Rayen [High School]. You probably would know them." and loop folks in that way. I guess that was a long answer. My short answer is no, I didn't feel any ongoing pull or affiliation as a result of doing that. But it was helpful, and it helped me find my classes.

TW: Being as introverted as you were, how did you network? How did you make connections your freshman year?

JR: I stayed with the group of folks from my high school. That's why it was so important when our friends left, we found each other. We were like, "Wait, who else?" So, I just stuck with my core group. I did sometimes study with other folks. But now that I think about it, because our majors were the same, Lynn and I would meet on Sundays either at the library or each other's houses. We stayed pretty close to home base.

We would go to the parties YSU used to have. The fraternities and sororities would throw parties on Fridays or Saturdays—I was there for that!

I was thinking about it after I saw your questions. The big room, not the Ohio room... the Chestnut Room [in Kilcawley Center]... It would be filled with other Black students. And I was like, "Where'd they come from?" I remember you needed your ID [to get in to the event], and you could sign someone else in. So I think the students who typically didn't even come would give their ID to somebody else. Because all those Black kids did not go to YSU. I promise you.

That's what I did. I worked, but I didn't work on campus. Try as I might, none of my friends, we weren't ever able to get jobs on campus. So, we all had off-campus jobs. Knowing what I know now, and having worked on campus, that would've been key to bringing us in to another peer group, another form of connection to the University. We all would schedule all your classes in the morning or the afternoon and then work off campus. Then you just don't come back until the party on Friday.

TW: Why do you feel like you guys couldn't get jobs on campus?

JR: You know, it's funny because I met a young woman a couple of years ago at an event at YSU. She sat there [near me]. She was a Hispanic young woman. We are still in contact. She was describing the exact same experience at the table. I didn't know her before then. And I was like, this is shameful because thirty years later, you are having [the same problem]... Her friends, though, they created a social group for Latino students, and they were way more progressive than us. We were just like, "Fine, you don't want us here."

I think it was, like so much else, like the people who worked there, or the professors, it was folks that they knew [getting hired]. I mean, just [like] what I experience here, in the world of work, you hire and gain access based on who you know. And we didn't know anyone. No one would – what would I call it? I guess we call it like, sponsor you to say, "Hey, Jen's a hardworking student. She does well here. We gotta make sure..."

I was employable, right? I worked for Bank One, so I would leave campus and go downtown and work half a day there. Then I got myself a better job at Wilcom Cellular One as a receptionist, so I would work a half day there. So, I was never without employment, but not student employment for whatever reason.

TW: When I apply for jobs, they call it “Fair Chance” where its like they hire everybody regardless of who you know, what race, and all that other stuff. Do you think that there were problems with that, as far as students finding jobs at that time?

JR: Yeah, I think there was something incredibly broken. When I think about it, there was not one of my friend groups who worked on campus. And we were all employed, right? It would be different, you know?... I worked on campus for years, in a student program. And I know not all 50 of my kids [in the program] without some additional training and development were... Some work, some development was done. But that wasn't how I see it, or remember it being the case. I think it [student employment] had some motivations that were definitely biased, at the very least.

TW: Did you have any mentors on campus? Any important professors; any external communities outside of campus that helped you with your collegiate career?

JR: In undergrad, I recall, even though I was in honors classes in high school, I had some bad experiences with math. So, I decided I wasn't good at math. Although I had always been good at math until I got to high school. I let them convince me. Anyway, when I got to YSU and I needed to take some of the preliminary classes, I would just take them Credit/No Credit. It was like my second or third, maybe my third class, and I thought I was doing well because I was taking the same guy. Once I did well, I was like, “Oh it's him.” He was like, “Why are you taking these classes Credit/No Credit?” I said, “Because I'm not good at math.” He was like, “Who told you that? You're earning an A, and you're just getting a credit.” I think that was a huge turning point for me to dispel that narrative that I wasn't good at math. He was really encouraging and helpful.

There was another professor- I think it was Statistics? I had dropped it the first time. I was going to drop it a second time. He was like, “Stick with me for week four. If it does not start to click, I will personally tutor you.” That never came to pass, because it clicked. He kept working with me as a part of the class. I think those are seemingly small but really meaningful interactions.

Then, a little later with my graduate program, one of my professors invited me to a conference. Actually, two of them. One has since passed on. But they invited me to a conference in

Columbus to speak on a panel. I was like, “What? Me?” And I did. I really think that changed the trajectory. I learned a lot there – how to interact with them, what they were looking for. They would call me for different things. So, when I started to work on campus, I ended up having students of theirs intern for Upward Bound. It came full circle, that engagement, that even informal mentorship. So, there were [mentors on campus].

TW: Did you pursue the same major when you went to graduate school?

JR: I pursued a master's in higher education. Initially, it was going to be counseling. I learned in my pre-internship that that was not the career for me. In your pre-internship, you do videos, they observe, and you keep back or whatever. I can remember sitting there thinking, “We can solve this really quickly. Like, we don’t need to do counseling. You just need to do this, this, and this.”

I ended up being a case manager right after graduate school, though, because I’m more of a social worker. Let’s get in here and fix some things. Here’s a plan. Execute it. And you’re fine. That’s not how counseling works. So, I switched over to higher education, because I had come too far to not finish my master’s in education. And then a few years later, I was getting a job on campus in higher ed.

What I will say, too, if I may, we have a 26-year-old son. And the friend that I speak of, what we did in our paths... I would say one thing about YSU: Sometimes there were opportunities. There weren’t a lot, and you could miss them if you weren’t careful. But, when I was invited to do a thing, or access was granted, and I took advantage of it, those were the turns and curves that brought me here to the Wean Foundation. Whereas one might be like, “Well, what does that mean? I’m not doing that,” I’m like “Alright, I’ll go check it out.” Then meet someone there.

My mom used to say when I worked on-campus, whenever there was something going on like the State of the University address, she would say, “I was watching the news, and I saw you! How do you always find the camera?” I was like, “Well mom, quite honestly, there aren’t that many of us.” And so, I think the camera finds me. But at the same time, I would go to those things, because why not? You never know who you might see. You never know who you might meet. You never know what you might learn. That’s kind of how I approach life.

TW: That mindset of just exploring different things, opening opportunities up for yourself... Do you feel like having that mindset throughout college is what helped you to get a career at YSU once you graduated?

JR: Yeah, for sure. What they say? “Feel the fear and do it anyway.” Even now, public speaking is not my favorite, and I do it. It’s not going to hurt me. Well, it might—it hurts a little bit. But generally speaking, I think that’s exactly right. Nothing is going to beat down your door at home and present itself. Very little, right? So, if the mindset is to learn, to explore, to grow, to develop, how do you do that? It’s not by myself, on my computer. So, I think so.

I think too, one of the things that attracted me to work at YSU, because it wasn’t my first job out of undergrad, is my attention span is not that long or sustained. I would work somewhere for a year or two. What I thought about the university was you could go to different departments and not lose your PERS, not lose your vacation time. So, it was like my way of being able to try other things but not having to feel like I was starting over.

[Tilisia talks about a technology issue. After a pause, they can continue the interview.]

TW: How did you land a job at YSU?

JR: I just applied. I keep saying “back in the day” but I think I saw it in the paper. Before that, though, I remember calling my academic advisor for something when I first came out of undergrad. I was so nervous. They were like, “They’re hiring for an academic advisement position.” But by the time I mustered up the courage to call the person she told me to call, the position had been filled. So, I went on. I did some other things of course. I was in a job. I was a foreman at GM. I had completely come out of the field, and I didn’t like that job, not one bit. And I saw that job advertised, multi-cultural coordinator, and I simply applied.

I’m so glad I did. One of my best friends – he wasn’t [my friend] then. I met him at YSU – was on the search committee that brought me there. To this day, sometimes he’ll text me and say, “I remember this sharp Black girl came in with her black business suit.” Tilisia, I had this scarf tied around my neck and knotted like a flight attendant. [They both chuckle.] So, we joke about that to this day.

I was able to get the job and make a new friend that I have now, oh my god, 25 years later. Some good things came out of YSU for me for sure.

TW: Can you talk about the work you did for the Upward Bound program? You said you would encourage students to sign up for the program. I’ve heard of that, but I didn’t join Upward Bound. Can you explain a little bit of what you did?

JR: Yeah, so, I was working for the Center for Student Progress, and my executive director, she and another director, had applied for the grant. When they got it, I then applied to leave her department and go to Upward Bound. The mission there was to get first-generation, college-bound students to enroll and graduate from college. I was like, “That’s me! I speak that language.” I had a bit of community engagement experience. I had worked at Jobs and Family Services. I had been a case manager at a mental health agency, so I felt like I had the right background. Then I just, really, applied it there.

The students and their families, we gave them information and guidance. After-school tutoring was a requirement of all the students. Saturday enrichment, where they came on campus for half a day, once a month. We would do home visits. All this stuff I had brought with me from my background, whether it be mental health or social services, it was not independent of academics. All those same things are what keeps, not even sometimes a terribly bright but just a good student, from succeeding. So, I was able to apply that to make sure that those weren’t barriers.

I wish I remembered the exact number. We had I want to say like an 80-something percent college-going rate, which surpassed the city and the state. We had a 100% high school graduation rate. We were no joke in Upward Bound at YSU.

They gave me another program; it was called SCOPE [Summer College and Occupational Preview Experiences]. I think it’s still around, too. So, they put that under my direction, and I had some amazing people who worked with me: coordinators, teachers, resident assistants, who all believed in the mission. It was very cool when these same students started to graduate and come to YSU, and work in our office or work as resident assistants. It just kind of kept the family going. One of them—actually, her partner is here and works with me – but one of my favorite UB kids is going for her PhD. She graduated from Upward Bound and she’s finishing up her PhD. We have an incubator space here at the [Wean] Foundation, so when she’s in town, she’ll do work downstairs. It’s amazing. I still just light up when I have memories of Upward Bound and SCOPE.

TW: Do you still work with those programs today, or with similar programs?

JR: Similar. Part of the mission of the [Wean] Foundation, one of our priorities is educational opportunity. So, we absolutely provide funding to programs similar to Upward Bound. For a while, we were also supporting Summer Bridge – which is a YSU student [orientation program] that I also used to run. Which is very cool. Yeah, so we do. Still a very, very worthy and worthwhile endeavor – going to college, persisting, graduating is more than a notion. Nobody gets that better than me.

TW: What exactly do you do at the Wean Foundation? What is your position?

JR: I am the President of the Wean Foundation. I started as a program officer, and then I was promoted to VP. I'm now the president. I've been here, it'll be 16 years in October, and I'm like, "Where'd the time go?" So, I left YSU and came to Wean. I'm responsible for carrying out the vision of the Foundation. And under my leadership, race equity and inclusion have become mainstays. I'm really happy and excited. One of the things I do is make recommendations to the Board on what organizations or programs that we fund and really push for racial equity.

It's been two years now and we're making some progress. We fund organizations whose leadership, whether that be executive staff or board, their race demographics are representative of the communities in which we work. That is not to say that white-led organizations don't do good work, because they do. Going back to our previous conversation, there are also Black, Hispanic, and Latinx-led organizations who can do that too. Those organizations have typically been under-resourced, and it's part of my mission to make sure that it's equitable—the funding, how they're able to do their work. I really push general operating funds and multi-year funding, which is not a thing necessarily. It is a thing, but it's not widespread in philanthropy. A lot of funders like to do one year and a program. We're really turning that kind of thinking, that narrative, on its head and doing things differently at the Wean Foundation.

TW: How did you get started with your career at the Wean Foundation? What do you remember about that first year, when you started working and you first walked into the Wean Foundation?

JR: Tilisia, I didn't even know what philanthropy was. I remember Googling it and trying to find out. Now I get it. Well, I would hope! It's not foreign to us – and it's not foreign to Black folks. We've been giving and actually give at rates higher than other demographics. Sometimes it's just phrased differently, and it looks differently. It's not always as formal.

I remember going to a conference, one of my first weeks here. I called my husband, and I was like, "What they're talking about, I've never thought of." He was like, "Well Jennifer you're new, you don't have to." I was like, "No, you don't understand, I've never had the thoughts. They didn't exist for me." I said I wanted to come home. And he said to me, because he's such a supportive and wonderful man, "I can come and get you right now, or you could stay. You can stay and you can listen, and you can learn. What better time, being new, can you just listen and learn?" It was very helpful, and needed, and useful. He also pointed out what folks know, you can learn. Your lived experience, that's your sweet spot. That's your contribution.

And I promise you, the next day we went on a tour of a place. It was housing, but they had social services in the building, and they had a pantry. Now this was 2007. The pantry wasn't

typical in that it was laundry detergent, cleaning supplies, and feminine hygiene products. The other academics in this space were like, “What’s this thing you call a pantry? Where’s the food?” I spoke up and said these are the things you can’t get, at the time with your SNAP card. The facilitator was like, “Jennifer, say more about that.” I was able to explain it because I worked at Jobs and Family Services, and I had worked with families that were under-privileged or under-resourced. So, I started to carve out what my contribution can be. Not only does it not have to look like everyone else—it shouldn’t. Like, it’s my point of view which makes the contribution.

There were some challenges with my writing. You asked what I do here... Those recommendations to the Board – we take everything an organization gives us, sometimes 20 to 40 pages, and we do an analysis. And then what we call a write-up for our Board in a couple pages. As bright as I used to think I was, and I am, that’s kind of writing I was like, “Wait, what?” I would get my drafts back from the then-President, and it would just be littered with notes. One time, I guess Trey [her son] would’ve been in second or third grade, and he’s like, “I didn’t know Mr. Joel gave you sloppy copies.” Because that’s what you call it in elementary school. I was like, “This is my best work! This isn’t some sloppy copy.” [Jennifer laughs.]

So, it was rough going for a while, and I would study. He would give me books, manuals, and how-to's. Then, I used to wear my hair relaxed, and I would be in the salon on a Saturday, under the dryer, with books and highlighters. I remember one time, a woman was like, “I wouldn’t be doing all that on the weekend.” And my mentor, who also worked at the University – I can’t believe I almost left her out – she told me, “Always be careful of what someone tells you to do and what they would do.” She said, “because I guarantee you if they had the opportunity you have right now, she’d be doing just what you’re doing.”

You asked me about professors, so let me just go back really quickly. As an employee, not as a student, I remember asking my supervisor different questions. Because as an employee, it’s not a lot different than being a student at YSU, in terms of belonging. She was like, “Well Jennifer, as you’ve noticed, I’m a white woman and I can’t help you with that.” She was like, “Look around at meetings, at events and what have you, and just watch and observe. Model or try then to meet someone that you think is what you’re trying to do and where you’re trying to go.” That’s what I found in Barb Orton. She was the Director of Equal Opportunity at the time [1996 - 2003]. So, I scheduled a meeting with her, mustered up the courage... That was ‘08, and she is still my mentor.

TW: What would you say were the heights of your career working at the Wean Foundation?
What were you most proud of that you participated in while working at the Wean Foundation?

JR: Hands down, our Racial Equity and Inclusion Strategic Direction. So, some groups have theories of change. They have strategic plans. We have an REI SD. It was a long, arduous process. We looked for consultants. We looked for help. We looked for models. No one was doing what we wanted to do in the way we knew we should do it and we could have [an] impact. And again, with resources, studying, my handy-dandy highlighter, I worked with our team, and we did it ourselves. It was hard. We're on the other side. It's actionable. We are living up to the priorities that we set—we have racial equity, outcomes that are measurable. So, I would say there are lots of things, and they center on that work. It's a result of that work that I think we continue to create opportunities. Our Board of Directors is two-thirds people of color. Not only is that in and of itself pretty dog-gone impressive. When you look around at the other Boards – not just philanthropy, but non-profits, philanthropy, government, all of that – we are set apart. I would love to be in the company of others, but I think we're a leader in that conversation. Our staff is the same. We have paused searches because we get down to five people and we have no people of color. So there's no way we're going to end up with a candidate, right?

I listen and learn and watch other colleagues of how they navigate a space. What do they say... take what you can and leave the rest. I think that's how we do our work here. I'm really proud of [how] we continue to work with young people. One of the folks we just hired, she is all about community also. So it's like in partnership, trying to bring folks into the Foundation. We call that activating the space. We have this beautiful building that's a gift to the community, so we work really hard to hold it open. This whole year, because it really was hard to come back after the pandemic, all of our spaces, our community rooms, our conference rooms, are free of charge to folks in the community because we want them here. We want you here.

I think anything that I do that is centered in my purpose, and consistent, big and small, I'm proud of it. You know what I mean? Like, my desk right now is a hot mess. If you look at my board, it's still the stuff I said I was going to do today. That's alright, because it's aligned. It's on purpose. And I speak up about it. I think the conversations around race, equity, and inclusion are still very courageous conversations at many tables. I know that I'm doing good work. I'm prepared. I'm informed.

To go back to the conversation, I cannot try, and no one asked me to speak on behalf of all Black people. I will show up in the space though for residents, and community folks, and those who are under-represented. I don't think that I can speak on their behalf, but I use my influence where I have influence. So, it's like, I do know some folks, and they should be a part of this conversation. We're the funder, the convener, the capacity-builder, so I'm bringing them with me. I could go on and on about what I do. It's a very cool place to be, for lots of reasons.

TW: What was it about the Wean Foundation that made you stay? You probably mentioned it before. But earlier, you also mentioned how you went from job to job. Something would be

interesting for a year, and then you'd go somewhere else. What was it about the Wean Foundation that made you stay as long as you did?

JR: Well, the first President was amazing. I think he really was intentional about my success, and what he exposed me to. I would go to places on behalf of him, even when I didn't know what I was doing, he'd be like, "You'll catch on. Take notes." So, I think that kind of confidence [he had] in me helped elevate my own.

When I interviewed for the job, I interviewed with the President. And then I went to lunch with the Chairman of the Board and the President. I mean, I was at YSU full-time, so I was fine. And I probably would have retired from YSU. I got to my car, and I called my husband, and I was like "I want that job." And he was like, "Oh, what happened to 'I got a job'?" I was like, "No, you don't understand."

I think it was [that] they were so inspiring. Neither of them are from this area, but they made it their business to know the area. To get out of the building, our ivory tower, as sometimes they call it, meet people, engage people, bring those folks into the Foundation. They gave me a lot of leeway in terms of my development of programs. They trusted me to do that, and do that well, based on my experience and expertise. The upward mobility, if I haven't mentioned that already. Not that it would be terrible – if I loved my work, I think I'd be fine as a program officer. But that there were opportunities for me to advance. Which is how I do the work here. Most people start here at one level, and then we continue to find opportunities for them here to advance.

So, I think that's why I stayed. The pay is good. Let's be honest, real talk. I am well compensated for my efforts. Great benefits. It's local, with the opportunities I travel—training, development, collaborations with other foundations in other cities and states and affiliated groups. My family, my home base, is here. I have an aging mom, so it's nice that I don't have to now, at this age, come back for her. She's up the street.

TW: You do a lot of different, interesting things. We know you're not the kind of person who is stagnant in one place. How do you overcome what they call "Imposter Syndrome"? It's like, you try something new, but that fear that you can't do it tends to overwhelm you, and sometimes it overcomes people. How do you deal with that feeling?

JR: I think two things come to mind. I always stress this with every young person who works here – every person, really. All my mentees. "Who are your people?" I can always tell the difference. Like they'll do a thing, say a thing, or move in a certain way, and I'm like, "Wait, they

don't got no people." Like, I can tell. I think having the right people around me. Knowing when I don't.

And going back to Barb [Orton]. I don't feel like I cut people off, but I have a sense of when its not suited for me. My brother used to say I would put people in "deep freeze." Barb [Orton] was like, "I don't like that. I don't like that at all." So, she had me start thinking of it like a spice rack. I was like, "I don't know what you mean." She said, "Well, you got your salt and pepper, and your seasoning salt, and your garlic powder. Those are things you touch probably most days when you're cooking. And then you've got your cloves and coriander. You don't throw those away because you're not using them. Because once or twice a year, you're digging back for them, and you need them. And they didn't go bad." So, that shift in mindset was really helpful.

I think the way I've tweaked that is I don't ever want anyone to feel... Sometimes in this position, I get the sense people call me when they need stuff. So the other thing I try to tell my mentees is stay in touch with people. A card here, a note there, a "Hello" every once in a while, goes a long way. I don't quite put people on shelves like they're my cloves. I try to keep them in the rotation even though I'm not hanging out with you. I'm not going to the party with you on Friday and Saturday. [They both chuckle] But, when we're doing something more broad and I'm like, you know what, so and so would make a good addition to this conversation. That kind of thing.

So, my people, and certainly my faith. Like, I know how blessed I am to be in this space, and I don't take it for granted. I try to pay it forward, leave the ladder down, hand back, whatever we want to call it. I think I'm my own competition, so, I think I've overcome some of that. I try to be prepared, and I know what I don't know. Again, my boss, the Chairman, he's like, "One of your greatest strengths is you know what you don't know." Then I try to surround myself with folks who can fill those gaps. Then you don't have to compete, right? Like we all win.

I don't know if I know enough about the theory of imposter syndrome. I feel like sometimes this idea that one doesn't deserve to be here and I feel like I do. And I feel like I earned it. I work really hard, even when I don't get it right or know what the hell I'm talking about. It wasn't for a lack of trying. So, I think that goes a long way and then having the right people around you. When you aren't sounding confident because you're not, or you feel less-than or you're lacking, those are the very people like, "Hold up. You got this, this, this in your columns for this. Where have you seen this before? What did you do then? Apply it."

TW: What advice would you give to people who maybe aren't as confident?

JR: I ask myself all the time, "Is that true?" I ask other people around me, too, "Is that true?" And I'll say it like five times: "Is it?... Is it?... Is it?" I think, first starting with self, because self-

talk can be a son of a gun. So, starting with that, and just repeating back, “Is that true? I can’t do that. Like where is that coming from?”

I will say it again about your people. You have to have people around who won’t stifle you, first. Sometimes you’ll give an idea, even to a friend, like “What makes you think you can do that?” Like oh, I’ve got to let her go. He cannot come along for the ride. So, knowing the difference when someone might be even thinking they’re just trying to protect you, but having sure you have a fair mix of folks who are going to lift you up. And provide you with some of that access and opportunities.

I get lots of invitations to do a lot of things that aren’t aligned with my purpose. It’s [my purpose is] on my board, up there in the corner. I keep it up there as a reminder. Someone asks me to be on a board, a council, a committee or to do a speaking engagement, I wouldn’t get my work done. Not that I don’t want to give or be a part of it. So I ask people, “Why me?” because it might just be the Black-lady-leader thing that you want, and not Jennifer. And I get that, that’s not problematic for me. Let me try to connect you with someone that really is what you want. So, I think that would be the advice too.

People who aren’t threatened by your intelligence, confidence, or goodwill. Who you all can share a space and navigate towards this whole advancement at work or upward mobility or whatever. We don’t know a lot of stuff, but I think if you’re around good people who mean you well, you’ll figure it out and you’ll be fine.

TW: Earlier you mentioned that being at YSU and a first-generation college student, you felt as if you didn’t have any options to go to other colleges. When you were pursuing your graduate degree, why did you choose to stay at YSU at that point?

JR: That’s a really good question. It may have still been finances. There was a period of time, and you’ll see what I mean in about twenty years, the years start to blend together. The memories aren’t crisp, but I do remember there was a period of time when I used to go the library on Sundays. They used to have the newspapers from different cities down in the basement, and you could go through the Waned ads. I was sending job resumes to Florida and Washington. I thought I wanted to move, and I guess it wasn’t in God’s plan for me. I never got a job out of state, so I think it’s as simple as that. I made an effort. I don’t know how serious I was or sustained. I feel like if I would’ve been incredibly serious, I’d have figured it out. I’d have went to live with a relative, or something until I found some work. I like my base. My whole family is here, so that’s good and comforting.

One kid asked me in Upward Bound, they saw I had my master’s degree, and they were like, “You stayed at YSU?” I remember at that time thinking, “Someone has to stay.” Like, I stayed for you. So, I think that might be part of it too. Let me just add this, I have not had the same

experiences that so many young people have with not being able to find viable employment here. I've always been gainfully employed, promoted, like the whole nine. I think if I had caught some of the same resistance that so many of you all get, it would have also been a motivator to go elsewhere.

TW: Well, that was all I had for you. Do you have anything else that you would like to add, for maybe future students? Because this research is going to go towards not just the exhibit we're trying to build, but for every student that'll come even years after me. They get to look back at how Miss Jennifer's experience was and learn from it. Do you have anything that you would like to say?

JR: One, I want to say what a wonderful project this is and thank you for doing it. You're doing such an incredible job, like the way you string your questions together, go back, and pick up something else. It feels very smooth and conversational, just like Cassie said it would be. So very well done. But to young people, just trying to expand their network, for the purpose of just getting to know someone without necessarily a goal in mind. Like, "I want to be an engineer, so I'm going to make nice with so and so," not that at all. Similar to what Janelle told me to do – look at who's out there. Don't just model or emulate their practices, see if they'll let you in and go from there. It may be a one-off, or it may be a lifelong relationship, like I have with Barb. She calls herself my "mother-sister-friend." You could end up, at the end of the day, with a Barb. One wouldn't do too bad with a Barb.

TW: I do have one question, actually. Do you feel like you had all the material you needed, here at YSU, to become successful? Or do you feel like your success now contributed more by your experience and work ethic?

JR: That's a great question. I want to be fair. I would love to say it's my experience and work ethic. I know without my education, and not just the paper degree, but going through the classes, experiences good and bad... just Jennifer—who knows? I don't know. I was on a panel once with a physician, and she said that if she had to do it all over again, she wouldn't go to college. She would've did blah, blah, blah. I don't even know I was all that delicate about it. I was like, "Well it's nice to be able to sit on the other side. That I wouldn't have been [inaudible] when you did!"

So, I better go with it's likely a fair mix of the two. When the one wasn't enough—when the degree wouldn't have been enough, I could depend on my experience and hard work ethic.

When that wasn't enough, I'm sure having the degree opened some doors. To be fair, I would say it's a good mix that I'm glad God lined up this way for me. For His Jennifer.

TW: Yes, most definitely. Thank you so much for contributing your time. Thank you.

JR: You're welcome. You're very welcome. And thank you, I appreciate it. I look forward to learning and hearing more. Sometime, if you're ever going to be in downtown Warren, let me know. I would love to host you here and show you around. Maybe we'll grab a coffee or something. That is sincere.

TW: Thank you so much.

JR: You're very welcome. Take good care.

END OF INTERVIEW