

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

YSU History

Black Student Experience project

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JHERA L. WOODARD

Interviewed by

Tilisia Yvonne Williams

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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Interviewee: Tilisia Williams

Interviewer: Jhera L. Woodard

Subject: YSU History - Black Student Experience

Date: July 26,2023

TW: This is an interview with Jhera Woodard for the Youngstown State University project on the Black Student Experience. This interview is being conducted using Webex. Today's date is July 26, 2023, and my name is Tilisia Williams.

Hello,Ms. Woodard. How are you?

JW: I'm doing well. And yourself?

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

JW: I'm from Youngstown.

TW: How was it growing up in Youngstown? What were some of your experiences like?

JW: It was interesting. I was born in Youngstown. I had an extended time where I lived in Atlanta - from 2nd through 8th grade – then I came back for high school. It was a bit of culture shock coming back to Youngstown 'cause living in Atlanta, you have lots of things that you could do. It's kind of country in Youngstown, you know – 6pm stops the buses. You ain't got nowhere to go. You gotta have a car to get everywhere. So, it was a bit of shock to the system to come back for high school. Once I got past my initial irritation, it was fine. Good times. [I] met some really good folks, and it was good experiences. I can't complain, after I got myself past the shock of not much to do.

TW: What do you remember about the neighborhood you lived in when you came back to Youngstown?

JW: So, I lived on the East Side of Youngstown. It was community; everybody knows everybody. Youngstown is a small city. Everybody knows everybody if you're on a certain side of town. Most folks know families. There weren't lots of things to do, but there were more activities to do. There were a lot of house parties, congregating, and going skating on Sundays. Maybe hanging out in parking lots. You know, those kinds of things. I remember those experiences growing up. And the high school... it was all about your high school, being East High. Football is big, so it's a lot of Browns fans. But I'm Steelers [fan]. That's the joy of living in Youngstown; you're going to be Steelers or Browns. You just have no choice.

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

JW: I am, yes.

TW: What made you decide to come to YSU?

JW: So, I started my journey at Kent [State University]. I had lots of scholarships. I got accepted to OSU [Ohio State University], to Kent, YSU—I forget what the other one was. I started at Kent my freshman year. I transitioned to YSU, because I decided to change my major to nursing. I was pre-med; I had every intention to be a pediatric neurosurgeon my entire life, but I decided to research nursing while I was at Kent. I realized that being a physician is more about the condition [of the patient]; they don't see the person. You don't see me. You see that I have a problem. Where nursing is holistic; they're going to look at every aspect of it. So, I was very intrigued with nursing. I didn't like dorm life, so I did not want to live in dorms no more. [I] came back home to Youngstown, so I could sleep in my own bed and enjoy the nursing program at YSU.

TW: Did you have any mentors, or people who you looked up to as a YSU student, because you say you are a first-generation college student. Most of the time, they don't have people within their family to look up to for guidance, so did you? Even if you did have people [to mentor you]

in your family. I'm not saying you didn't. Who were your mentors when you were a college student?

JW: I'm not going to say I really had mentors in college. I am the baby of three [kids]. My mother told me I was the child she knew would do anything she was told- and she is correct. So, my mom was pretty much my mentor. I have a very healthy fear of my mother. I still do to this day, but she told me you have to go. I went because I was told I had to by my mom because we had a lot of struggles. My mom was supposed to be the child that went to college, and she was slated to go to YSU [in] journalism. She got pregnant with my sister in high school, so it became somewhat of a disappointment to the family that she did not [attend college]. So, I took her place.

TW: Being the youngest of three, was there more pressure on you to complete college? Or did you feel like it was?

JW: Yes, the pressure was there just because everyone in the family looked at me to be the accomplishment. But it's pressure that I could handle. I'm a person [who's] not affected by those things. I just run my race. I put my blinders on, and I run my race. That's exactly what I did.

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

JW: It wasn't bad since I had already been at Kent. I was a little bummed that I had to add an extra year to my college life, cause I'm like "I'm getting done in four." No, you're not. You're getting done in five. So, it took me five years to do it, but it was an easy transition just because I had already had my freshman year at Kent. I knew what I needed to do and what I wanted to do. It was an easy transition as I moved into the process at YSU.

TW: What differences did you see between YSU and Kent University? Were there positive differences; were there negative differences? Do you regret not staying at Kent?

JW: A slight part of me regrets, because there was more diversity at Kent, just in relationship to outside people. A lot of people from outside are not coming to YSU. It's usually people who live

in Youngstown that are at YSU. That's one thing I would've liked to have done differently, but I had a slight Youngstown mentality. When I say that, I mean "Youngstown mentality" that I'm not open to anything else. I'm used to this environment, and that's all that I want. Some of those outside influences I was like, "Oh, I don't want to do that" or "I don't like that they do that." I wanted to go home, but that would've been a better experience just from having a lot of different places, different folks, different orientations, different cultures. There was more of that at Kent.

TW: You speak of how there was more diversity at Kent. I spoke to a nursing student [on] Monday, and she said she was 1 of 5 [Black] nursing students who completed the nursing program [at YSU]. She graduated in the early 2000s. Would you say that you saw that a lot when you were a nursing student? There weren't many Black student nurses, or were there more of them when you went to school?

JW: There was not many of us. There were less than ten that I can recall. Nursing is competitive like physicians, so some of us did not talk to each other, because that's just how it is. I don't understand that personally because for me, I don't need to compete with you. We're all in this together. I just want us all to make it. From what I can remember, I know there were less than ten of us. There were not many of us in the nursing program. We had one male, which was very exciting to me. I was so excited that we had one Black guy; it was great!

TW: Were you apart of any groups? Did you participate in any outside events while you were a YSU student?

JW: I did not. I ran my race, kept my binders on and ran the race. So, I went to school and that's all I did. I did not engage in other activities cause my mission was "get out."

TW: How did you balance student life, your collegiate career, and your regular life?

JW: I'm a very organized person. I used sequential logic—so, understanding what I needed to do in class, when classes were, when I could work, 'cause I needed to work, and how to balance my home life. Home life for me was not as easy when I was in college. My mom was dealing with an addiction, and she was deep in her addiction. So, it was a bit of a struggle to deal with some of that. My two little brothers, who were actually my second cousins, were in the home

as well. So, you just navigate and find the time. When I needed to study, maybe I didn't study at home. Maybe I'd do it at the Maag Library. Do it at the library, maybe go to another friend's house to do some studying, especially as I got into the nursing program. The first two years, of course, that was a lot easier. Once I got into the nursing program, I just really honed in on that time management.

Work for me was always on the weekends. So, I would work Saturday and Sunday to get whatever money I needed to help me to survive. During the week it was always planned out. "Here's what I'm going to do;" even to the point of courses. I knew what courses I was going to take every semester. I think we were on semesters, forgive me, I don't remember. Whatever it was, it was always strategic for me. Here's the plan and here's the time I'm going to lay it out.

TW: With you being one of very few Black nursing students, you say there was a lot of competition. Did you feel a sense of division, because other nursing students were not speaking to each other? They saw each other as competition.

JW: Yes. I'm one those people who would ask, like if I knew somebody in class was better at an area or subject than I was, I'm flat out asking them. I'd be like "Hey such-and-such, I heard that you did really well. Would you be willing to talk about that or have a conversation?" No. It's very competitive. It's very stay-to-yourself and cliqued.

You got your cliques. At some point, we all cliqued up. And my clique was three people. There were three other people, so there were four of us total. But if somebody ever had a question or needed something, I would always be there. So, if somebody else would ask me, "Jhera how did you figure this out?" or "How do you do this?" I said, "Oh I did this." Or "I did that." But it became very clear—it became pockets. Very competitive. Those were in the top whatever [of the class], they're going to do whatever they can to stay in the top.

TW: You mentioned the Maag Library being one of your places of comfort when it came to studying and doing schoolwork. Were there any other places of comfort for you, specifically? Or did you notice that there were certain places you would see that the African American students would gather and that they would call their own?

JW: So, the library for me was more just truly studying from the nursing perspective. Where the majority of Black folks (from a congregation perspective) hung out, even some of them studied – but really wasn't no studying going on, we was just playing around – was Kilcawley. At some point, that's where most of us would be. We had a little pub, like a little tavern, that we used to go to. But we usually hung out in the seating areas on the first [level]. I haven't been to YSU in

so long. On the first level, there used to be seating areas at the Kilcawley and we would just congregate there. I couldn't study there. We just played around too much. So, it wasn't a good study area.

TW: What do you feel the nursing students, or at least the ones you interacted with, what do you feel like they were competing for? Were there special privileges for good students? Was it just like, how you say, you had a goal to reach. Do you feel like they all have that same mentality?

JW: I don't think there was anything to take. I mean unless you wanted to summa cum Laude, or you wanted to be the top whatever. But the reality is, out here in the world, it don't matter. It don't matter if you were number one or not. We all could've got the same job at the same place. I mean the degree is one thing, but you also got to pass your boards. Like that's the big test! Getting the bachelor's in nursing is great, but now you've got to pass that. You've got to actually get your license.

That was tough. Some of us didn't pass on the first go. That's tough! Not everybody passes their licensure on the first go, but I never understood it honestly, Tilisia. I don't know. I don't understand; being number one doesn't give you extras. Maybe scholarships, if scholarships became available throughout the course of our time there. Maybe you would become more eligible for scholarships. But there wasn't like preferential treatment you receive. I never felt like our teachers treated us differently because you were on another level. Honestly, it just didn't make sense to me.

TW: Being one of very few [Black] nursing students, did you ever feel as though there was more pressure on you when you were surrounded by other white students? Did you ever feel like you had something to prove?

JW: There is always something to prove as being a Black person. I can't speak on being a male, but in nursing, I imagined for our male counterpart it was harder for him. But as a Black female in nursing, just because it is more of the innate of being Black, that we always have to "be -". We have to be smarter. We have to work harder. We have to prove. There are the stereotypes. However someone looks at me, or how they feel that I am supposed to behave. It's all learned behavior. So, it's whatever you learned of as a result of who I am. That, "Oh I don't know if they can do that, or you could do this or you could do that."

So, it was always just I'm here because I'm supposed to be here and I'm smart enough to be here. I can do what needs to be done. There was always that slight pressure, but I did not allow

that to make me behave differently towards someone. If another student who wasn't Black had questions or concerns it was great. My nursing clique was me, two white girls, and a Hispanic [student]. So, we all wanted to make sure that everybody made it.

I had something to prove for my family as well. I am the one. I was the one. That was the top, so I'm the one I got to do it. I've got to prove to everybody underneath me you could do it too.

TW: When you finally graduated, and you walked across that stage, what was that atmosphere like? To even prove to yourself that yeah, I was worthy of this, and I finally got it. What did that feel like?

JW: It was very gratifying. it was relief. it was exciting. It was joy, not only for myself, but for all these other people who made it through. Excitement and being proud for my family. I did not realize until many years later just how relevant that was to them. My grandfather, who I was very close to, passed the year before I graduated, and I didn't really want to finish school. I didn't really feel the need to do it. I was like, "You gone leave me now, and I've got to continue this?" I already got to deal with my mom, and I got all this other stuff. It's like now you're gone.

But my grandmother was still with us. [My older sister] told me that the day after graduation, my grandmother went to my grandfather's grave site. I might get a little teary, but she told him "We finally did it! We got one!" And that was enough for me; that made it even made it more relevant. I just did not realize until I learned just how significant it was for me to do it.

TW: Nursing is one of those programs where school could never really prepare you for how it actually is when you start nursing. Did you feel yourself encountering more pressures once you started working, getting your licenses, doing the board test, and all that?

JW: No! My favorite degree, and I have dual master's degrees, is my undergrad because our teachers taught us in capstone [class] about nursing burnout. That you might go through "nursing shock," because you go from 1 or 2 patients to 8 patients. [They said] "Nurses eat their young" and that cracked me up. But I'm like, what do you mean they "eat" us? Like it was really funny to me, but it was very true. I experienced that in my first job, but I wasn't pressured by it because I knew what to expect. I was very prepared, and I appreciate my nursing program for preparing me for what it's like out here. I mean being in nursing school, you're just a glorified nursing assistant. That's all you really do. Then you become this "oh you're the end-all-be-all, and you're in charge." It's like, oh okay... but we were well prepared. I was well prepared for that.

I also worked – I was a unit clerk at St. E’s [St. Elizabeth’s Hospital] when I was in college. Observing that reality show, watching them nurses and they reality shows, helped me as well. And everybody is different. Being a nurse is your personality, or your inner being of how you're laid out that's going to help you to be able to address it. If you’re more high-strung, it's probably going to be tough for you, because you're going to be, “oh my god!” But if you’re kind of chill, laid back, most things are not going to bother you. You'll be able to work through it.

TW: You said that as a student you didn't join any groups or attend any events; your main focus was school. Despite that, did you feel connected to a larger community outside of school? Did you build relationships with other people outside of your program?

JW: Yes! My community was built around my high school friends. One of them, her degree [was in] fashion merchandising. She was at YSU, and we had other high school friends. I stayed connected to my friends. My family because they were my support. But I didn't dabble a lot... That's probably something I could've done differently. I probably should have dabbled a little more into the college experience. But I am a nerd by nature and I'm just going to stay in the books. So, I'm not that person that's “Ooh, I'm going to try this” or “ooh, I’m going to do that.” Uh huh, its them books. Them books is what it's all about. I had the support of my friends, as well as that smaller network of nursing friends. We would spend time together. We might hang out at times. So, it was the support of those folks. I keep my community small. I'm a person who keeps people really close. It's hard to get in there but once you're in, you’re in. I don't usually allow too many outside folks inside of my unit.

TW: What made you want to pursue a career in the medical field in general? Because before you were a nursing student, you said you were a pre-med student. What was it about that field that attracted you to it?

JW: I'm going to tell you the typical thing that we all say, because I want to help people. But as a child it was always in me. I felt like nursing, even being a physician, is a calling. It was a calling on my life. Even as a child I was very helpful to others. I could remember being like 5 years old and tending to little ones when they have cuts and scrapes. I was like “Oh come here, let me take care of you.” It was always just innate for me to want to do it.

I started to gather information about what jobs are available, or what you could do. Since I was 8 years old, it was a pediatric neurosurgeon. Why specifically that? I still don't understand. I just know it was I want to be a pediatric neurosurgeon. And people would ask me, “Why?” I’ve never been able to figure that out. It just amazed me so much, and I was a kid so I'm like I want

to work with kids. I think I cut stuff. And the brain is interesting. I was like, "Let me just go with that."

TW: You seem like the type of person where, once you want something, you work for it, and you stay on that path to get it. I've encountered a lot of people who go through different phases before they find something they actually want to do. What advice would you give to those people, where it seems like they are unstable in everything? And it seems like they have no idea, essentially, what they want to do with their lives?

JW: That's a tough one. I have a child; my son just graduated high school, so he's kind of on that. I would say you have to go out there and look and pursue. It's not just going to fall in your lap. If it's a person who's like middle school/high school, I would say you need to start taking advantage of opportunities that might be available to you through your school. Can your guidance counselor find you summer programs? Or maybe just a weekend thing? Or a 2-hour session that talks about "here's this type of position." Taking some of the career assessments to see some of the areas that you fall in, so that you could gather some insight as to here are things I'm interested in. It has to also be gleaned from the experiences. I'm big with my children – and we talk about that a lot – what are things that you want to do?

If I could advise parents, I would say parents would need to really have conversations with the children. What are things that you're interested in? Then try to find ways to expose them, because exposure to things is what's really helpful to us. So, if you can expose [them] to the things that they're interested in, that's how you can try to gain better insight. Or again talking [about careers], even if the parents like talking. My daughter claims she wants to be a nurse. Mm-mm – she don't have it her. She does not have the time management. She's not organized. I told her maybe down the line. She'll be starting 10th grade in about three weeks. I said maybe we could start to gravitate towards that if you show me through your skills...

But definitely the experiences and exposures. That's a huge component. You've got to try to see how you can get more insight into things you're interested in. It helps you to understand, "Yeah, I want to do that," or "I really don't want to do that after I heard what they can do," or "I have even more interest." Then how can you pull further into gaining experiences?

TW: What advice would you give to other young African American female students when it's hard to balance school life and work life? Especially if they may be going through a lot of things at home. I was a nursing student, and I found it hard to even just complete the program. I was comparing myself to other people when they knew stuff I didn't. By being in Youngstown and going to Youngstown schools, they were learning stuff and knew stuff already that I didn't. So, it was very hard to not compare myself, and eventually I did end up just switching [majors]. What

would you tell other young ladies, like myself, who feel like they don't measure up to what everybody else might know?

JW: I would say, especially in that situation, that is internal. You internally have to know your worth. That part of you has to be built up. I did not have that struggle. I knew. I'm like, "I'm going to do it. Nobody is going to stop me; it doesn't matter what you say." You should not compare yourself to others. Do not compare yourself. Yes, it is a competition - we all compete. It does not matter. I mean, we all have to compete to get into the nursing program, but I don't have to compare myself to someone else. I would say know your worth. If you have struggles - and none of us know everything - if there are struggles, you find people that can help to connect you through those struggles.

With the balance of work and life, that is tough because school is full-time. You have to give all of your time to nursing school. And once you figure it out, then if you can do a little working, you can do that. It also requires good support. You need good supportive people around you. If some people are negative to you, they should not be in your circle—and that includes family. You only surround yourself with positivity. You only surround yourself with people who you know will help you to move forward. But it also has to be that internal [confidence]. I would say that's the piece. Know your worth. If you got into that program, you can get out of it. Because it ain't easy to get in! So if you got in, that's half the battle. Yeah, you've got to get through all of that [doubt]. If you got in, you are worthy to get out.

Also giving yourself grace. Understanding you don't know everything. It is good to hug yourself every day. Give yourself a hug every day. You good! You going to make it! Maybe I'm not good at this part of critical care. I'm going to try my best to figure it out. Or I'm at least going to pass with the passing grade I gotta have. Maybe I want an A, but maybe I'm going to have to take that C. And as long as I pass, that's good too. There were classes that I had to tell myself, "You ain't getting an A in that class." But if you get the passing score that you need to get through, that's all that we're going to work towards because this is not your area, that's okay.

But you have to know your worth and love yourself enough. Give yourself the stickers that you deserve for where you've gotten thus far. Do not dwell on the negative. Don't dwell on the things that other people are doing well. Again, don't compare yourself. It's your race. You're running this race. It's yours. It ain't nobody else's. It's yours. If you have high expectations for yourself - maybe I want to be the top, the first one in the class - if that isn't really the reality, you've got to deal with the reality. Meet yourself at the level that you're at. Love yourself enough to know, "yeah, I've got this." But it really is internal. I would try to say build up your confidence in yourself, because you can do it.

TW: Thank you so much for contributing your time to this. And thank you so much for the good advice at the end. I think for a lot of college students, especially when you're first-generation, and nobody else in your family has taken this route that you've taken. It's hard not to put pressure on yourself and compare yourself, because you feel as though you have to be perfect, because nobody else has done it before you.

JW: Right.

TW: So, thank you so much for being that example and being that leader. I also want to thank you for contributing to this project as well.

JW: You're very welcome. I must say, I'm not perfect. I never felt that way – even as a first-generation [student]. That is something else that I would say to other people, no one is perfect. You just need to do the best you can do, and that's exactly what I did. I did the best that I could do. I gave 100% because that's all anybody could give. I'm not a person who believes in 110, 115, 120 [percent]. All I could give you is 100%, and that's exactly what I gave. Run your race and move towards your goal. That's all I did, but I can see the benefits. There are many others that have now gained their degrees because I did it first in my family. So, I'm very excited about that.

TW: Thank you. You have a blessed day.

JW: You're welcome. You as well! Good luck with everything in your life. You're going to do amazing.

TW: Thank you.

JW: You're welcome. Bye!

END OF INTERVIEW