

**RG53.1 History of Wake Forest University Oral History Project  
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**Interviewer: Tanya Zanish-Belcher**

**Q: [00:00:04] Please describe your family background and where you grew up.**

A: [00:00:21] I grew up in a Virginia town named Petersburg, Virginia, but I was actually born in Fredericksburg, where my father's people had a lot of influence. My grandfather died early - I was around a year old - but his wife, my grandmother, was an elementary school teacher and taught me in the third grade. Her people were the Bowes of Fredericksburg, and they were Howard University graduates. My Dad went to Howard for a hot minute and got into some difficulty with some frats who thought that they could paddle him so he left and finished up at Virginia Union University in Richmond where he met my mother. Dad was a history major, my mom was a chemistry major. And they didn't meet there. They knew the same people. They actually met at a small school in Spotsylvania County, Virginia, called JJ Wright High School and there was also elementary and one through twelve. That is the county where Alex Haley has some relatives buried. So my parents then married and lived in Fredericksburg, Virginia, and years later when my father died my mother commented that she had never lived by herself. She grew up in a family of seven brothers and sisters, and when she moved to Fredericksburg to teach, she lived in a colored boarding house for teachers. And then she met my dad and they married and stayed married for fifty years. She was a day student at Virginia Union. That was really a traumatic experience for my mother to live by herself. The background. I never thought that I would become an educator. I wanted to become a lawyer. Since I was age twelve. Here I am teaching history, my father's love in an undergraduate institution, in a class at the law school called business drafting, where we teach law students how to draft documents so that people can understand them. We work on clarity and getting rid of ambiguity, and structures, and that sort of thing within the courts. But I have one sister who is an educator also. She's principle of a technical school in Virginia. Her name is Nancy Maurici Norbury Holmes. So it's just the two of us girls. My mother had a big family - the seven siblings, and my grandma and grandpa. Grandpa was a minister who also was a plaster contractor, something we don't see much of anymore. During the depression, my grandfather would walk almost twenty miles one way from Hannover County, Virginia, to the city of Richmond to learn the new trade of plastering so that his family would not starve to death. And I've written about this in a book that was a collaboration of many professors on campus, Trauma and Resilience in the Southern - um - Culture, African American and Native American southern culture. I've articulated my grandfather's journey that sort of lead me up to being prepared to come to Wake Forest, because he eventually became a very successful plaster contractor. You couldn't make it on ten dollars a month as a preacher in a rural area. And he moved his family from Hannover County, where they were living on eight acres of farmland, to the city of Richmond. And in the black neighborhood in

Richmond, my grandfather was the first to get an electric stove, but he had my grandmother remove the stove because he didn't like the way the biscuits tasted. So they had to bring back a wood stove and cook for him that way. I grew up around a lot of uncles, aunts, cousins. My grandfather's father, Sam, purchasing land in the 1860s was a farmer and he had eighteen children. So the family was fast and that was the atmosphere I grew up in. Just lots of cousins and big holiday dinners, big funerals, big weddings, not expensive weddings, but just joy. The weddings back then were just a little bit different. There was no excess. It was more joy. So from Fredericksburg, my mother and father moved to Petersburg, where my mother began to work on her master's. And then her PhD. I spent most of my formative years in Petersburg, Virginia, where there was a lot of racial strife. People in Fredericksburg tended to be more genteel because families had depended on each other for such a long period of time. Separate but equal was acknowledged but it wasn't vicious. In Petersburg, it was vicious. Had I gone to a tennis court in a white park, I could be arrested. I lived in a neighborhood that was adjacent to a neighborhood all of us Virginians know as Colonial Heights. And in Colonial Heights, there were restrictive covenants written in the deeds. You shall not sell your home to a person of color. And we didn't even walk on the sidewalks in Colonial Heights. I mean that's how terrified we were of that area. Of course, that's changed now. There's been a gradual change. There are just something's you don't forget. But there were also tennis courts in Richmond that were preserved for blacks and for whites. We didn't have an tennis courts reserved in Petersburg. But Richmond did, but that was one of the reasons why Arthur Ashe left Richmond, Virginia, and went to live with a family and work with a tennis coach in Lynchburg, Virginia. Of course, you know he gained global recognition for the things that he did. As a matter of fact, I was teaching my class the other day and it struck me that he's the only black man to win Wimbledon, the US Open, and the Australian Open. And I'm going gosh, I thought somebody else had been there, but that hadn't happened. And that's a whole nothing issue. A whole other conversation.

**Q: [00:00:00] How did you end up coming to Wake Forest as an undergraduate?**

A: [00:00:03] At that time, 1969, our mission our being those of us who had done well in school, was to choose a school where we knew we could perform well and where we had a mission also to prove that we could compete with anybody. And it was really a tough situation because my parents and their siblings had gone to historically black schools, so things were already set up really for me to go to just about any school in the area that I wanted to which my relatives had attended. And the strongest contingency was at Howard University and I think my dad really wanted me to go to Howard, but I was a revolutionary. I said no Dad, I'm going to prove to these folks that I know how to work hard and I'm just as smart as they are. Because they've spent eighteen years trying to tell me that I'm not as good as they are and I'm going to show them up. So there were a group of us that ventured out to Virginia Tech, Wake Forest, University of Virginia was a little tough and I still have some negative feelings about University of Virginia because when you mailed in your application, you had to send in a picture. And that way they could tell what you were in terms of your ethnicity. I had a very dear friend by the name of Michael Howard, with whom I grew up. He was in Richmond and his parents and my parents were friends and we were part of this organization called Jack and Jill, which

was a black social organization to bring black kids together. [00:01:54] So that we could enjoy cultural things and get to know one another in different cities. And most big cities had this organization called Jack and Jill in fact my children belonged to Jack and Jill when they came along and my grandchild belongs to Jack and Jill. But anyway, I met Michael through my parents and Jack and Jill and he was already here. He said Beth, you have to come to Wake Forest. I said, No I'm going to Reed College. I have a friend out there that said I had to come to Reed College. Then I started looking at travel from Portland at Thanksgiving. And out there students were so wealthy they chartered a plane to come to the east coast. And I went hmm. I don't know if I'm going to be able to do all of that. Plus it was a long way from home, even though it's a wonderful college. Then I discovered that they didn't have a football team. So that was what did it for me. I was just part of athletics growing up, Virginia State University was at my back door, I went to all the football games, basketball games. In their earlier teaching years, my mother coached girl's softball and basketball and my dad coach the same. So we watched football every weekend because there was only one TV and whatever dad watched is what we watched. So football was a part of my life. When Michael, who had been here a year, said that Wake Forest needed women of color because there was this little thing called crossing the line of dating, and some of the administrators were uncomfortable with that, but our boys didn't have anybody to fraternize with. In terms of women because there weren't any black women on campus. I think there were two-day students, but none who lived on campus. And our guys had to jump in whoever owned the car and go across to Winston Salem State to get some female companionship. So Michael talked me into it believe it or not it was August before the fall when I committed. And we worked on a couple of packages. I got a merit scholarship here and a loan here and Dr. Scales reached into a fund and pulled out some money there and I had a Delta Sigma Theta scholarship from home, so when you put all together I had enough money to come to Wake Forest. Whereas Reed was going to give me a full ride. I'm glad I came. I met some wonderful people and we're all still very close. My first year there were probably only - there were less than twenty blacks. And we all spoke to each other, we helped each other, guys would tell me don't take that professor doesn't matter how smart you are, you're not going to get above a C. I listened, some of the others didn't, some of the others got Cs or failed. You know that particular professor - he's gone - that professor that I'm speaking about of now, he's dead but he was in the sociology department. Then there was one in the chemistry department. Be careful, it doesn't matter how smart you are. Those are the kinds of things that we shared, we shared notebooks, we shared information about what to expect on tests. It really was a great camaraderie. And we are still in contact with one another. There are twelve maybe fifteen of us still living, of that group, probably eight were athletes. All of them were good students, in fact of those athletes, four are lawyers. And then, we have an engineer who's getting ready to retire from AT&T. He was an athlete, he was not. My point is that all of these black men were scholarly. We had a valedictorian, a salutatorian, I'm speaking of the men. Of course, you know the women were smart. We knew how to get in and dig and get our lessons. But when there are black alumni activities, when we show up we tend to be a little clandestine. Because we struggled together and will always have that bond between us. Whereas it's a lot different now. I go through the campus, I have to make students speak to me. I will not allow a black student to pass me without speaking. And some of them look at me like I have chicken pox. Wh-What,

What? I have to stop and explain, look you are breaking a very old tradition that we had here and that is that we speak to everybody. Everybody. And at that time, a lot of the maintenance people were people of color. Everybody in the cafeteria was black. So we all established relationships with people who looked like us, and they would invite us to church, they would invite us to their homes. They helped us to survive this campus. Because when I left in 1973, I swore on a stack of bibles that I would never be back because of the meanness, the undercurrent, feeling that we weren't supposed to be here, and I really - I really had a tough time because I had a big afro about the size of Angela Davis'. I was about a size six and I had a skirt about up to my navel and when my dad came to pick me up, to carry me home for a holiday after the semester, he was so appalled he wouldn't speak to me. He did not say a word to me from Winston Salem to Petersburg, Virginia. He really had to get accustomed to the Afro. But all of us were like that. All of us were revol-we thought we were revolutionaries and we were about change. It was - and the stuff with the fraternities and the dances - they did that back in 1969. We had a big fight right up there on the quad. Some guys threw some bottles at us, and you know, we were crazy, we threw the bottles back. It's - it was a turbulent time. The most understanding people at the university were the top administrators. Dean Mullen, Dean Luck, we had dean of women then. Let's see of course Dr. Scales. He was very paternalistic and very understanding. Then we had the religion professor, who's now dead. And two or three others, there was no black professors on campus except for one part time religion professor Dr Louis, who has since passed. Oh, and the religion professor was Dr. Bryan. How could I forget Dr. Bryan. So there were a few people we could chat with. And discuss our dilemmas with, but for the most part, we handled our own problems.

**Q: [00:09:32] Do you think your Wake Forest experience fueled your desire to go to law school?**

A: [00:09:36] I was already there, I went to college to go to law school. It was the treatment of black people in Virginia that fueled that - I said this has got to change. Lawyers make change, so I'm gonna be a lawyer, much to my mother's chagrin because she wanted - I started out in pathology, I wanted to do science, and when I switched over she said oh no no we need doctors. But anyway I'm very comfortable, I'm a better writer than I am a mathematician. But what Wake Forest did was to augment my need to continue down a certain path. And the school helped me to prepare for law school, number one strong writing. I was a good writer when I came, but I was a much better writer when I left. I could always talk, but I really got to interact with people who had different points of view. And I learned to respect - see I was so mad all the time by the time I got here, I didn't want to hear what anybody else had to say, but I learned how to listen and I learned the art of debate. Then we weren't very multicultural at that time. If there was one Asian person, there was one. Very few Jewish people. If there were Jewish people, they didn't let us know it. The only way you could tell was perhaps by the last name. And the New York accent. There was not a strong Jewish contingency that was out front. It was white, and black. Those were the two main groups that tended to interact. What is most disconcerting now is the problems have resurfaced. And I think some black students have a right to be angry, but what they have to do is challenge that anger in a positive direction. If you speak loudly and harshly, people aren't going to hear

you. They shut down. So that's what I learned, the calm approach to effective persuasion. I can get my hair to stand up on the top of my head. If someone does something ugly to my children. But, uh, for the most part, and then I'd taken a mediation course. I'm a mediator. That's how me to how I prod through different problem areas. My son came to Wake Forest and I'm glad that he came here. He needed to see what life was all about. Even though he had gone to a couple of private schools, he ended up at Winston Salem Prep, which was another good experience for him because he needed to be around his people, to see what we face when we're all together. So that transition from Winston Salem Prep to Wake Forest was very revealing to him. And he had some ugly situations that happened to him because he is an athlete and he is big and he is brown. And I let him handle it. I wanted to get in it but he wouldn't let me and he handled it well. So when he gets out in life, he'll be able to handle life pretty well. Getting back to the Wake Forest experience, it prepared me for the practice of law not only in the writing, but what to expect. It was nothing that William and Mary's law school could do to me that I hadn't seen before or did not anticipate. So when things came up, I said is that all you got? What character was it that said I laugh in the face of adversity? It didn't tear me apart and make me bitter, as some experiences at Wake Forest had made me bitter. It was now in 1973 that by 1983 that I'd be back.

**Q: [00:13:57] That's my next question. Why did you come back?**

A: [00:13:59] Well, I tell you my husband was a football star, so he was treated differently from me. And Wake Forest always had open arms for their football stars, no matter what color, ok? And he was in the air force. We were in Shreveport, Louisiana, and I said I love Shreveport, but it's a long way from home and both of my parents were living then and I wanted to be closer to my parents. And his parents, because we were in the process of adopting a little girl and I said a granddaughter needs to be near her grandparents. So if I had been really smart, I would have said look I insist we live in Virginia, where my parents are and I would have had help rearing a daughter, but he wanted to be in between both sets of parents. His parents were in Chester, South Carolina, his dad was retired air force and his mother was a retired home-well homemakers never retire-but she was a homemaker. And so we were two hours from them and three hours and fifteen minutes from my parents. And that's how we got to wake forest, plus the medical school where Larry trained as a student, was anxious to have him back because he is a very good doctor. He's a very caring OBGYN, he's old school. And he wanted to be here, so me being the dutiful wife said ok. And it's a wonderful city for rearing children. My only regret was that I wasn't closer to my family to help out because my career suffered. I don't know if that's the right word, but it certainly didn't take the `journey that I had planned for it, or maybe god had planned something else for me. I don't know. But because my husband worked so much and was rarely home, I had to take part time employment to make sure I was home when my children got home because that was important to me. With my mother being in education, I rode home with her from school. My mother was always home in the afternoons, or my grandmother was there after my mother moved to the college level. For me, I'm not passing judgment on anybody else who has their family structured differently. But for me, it was important to be there when my children were there, plus their activities abounded. The skating, piano lessons. And when he got to be really serious about

tennis, we started to travel. So we were in Arizona, California, New York, Virginia, Florida, Alabama. We were all over the place after he was twelve years old and he was a national player. That didn't really lend itself to full time employment. And people were very kind about welcoming us back. Some of the old professors, who were a little stubborn and unable to broaden their thinking, were gone. And there was a new president in town and he certainly placed a high premium on diversity.

**Q: [00:17:36] Would you like to talk about your current position?**

A: [00:17:47] Years ago, I was asked to develop a course...what is it...first year seminar. For the history dept. I'm still with the history department. I took the course to American ethics studies for a few years, but I'm back in history and we bumped the course up to a three sixty-eight level. But basically, the course has now evolved into what I call race and the courts. And we look at Supreme Court cases, starting with Dred Scott. You know the one that says that a black man has no rights which a white man must respect. And Plessey. And move up through certain areas, such as education. We look at court cases and housing, property. We have a little session on sports and I talk about the athletes. And have them read the book forty million dollar slaves, where this author William Rodan has taken the position that professional sports is just a new kind of slavery. We have fourteen to eighteen students in the class. I only teach in the fall. What I tell the students is to not hurt anyone else's feelings, but leave yours at the door, but be free. Use the English language in its magnificent form to say what you want to say without being cruel, so you can say that a person - that what you did so and so appears to borderline on racism, without calling the person a racist. Don't do any name-calling. As a matter of fact, when I had mostly black students in my class, the white students told me they were afraid. They were afraid that people were going to jump all over them and I said I'm not going to allow that. That is not educational discourse, that's meanness, and I don't allow any meanness in my class but I do want to hear different points of view. I don't want everybody to say Bush did the right thing on Katrina. I mean, Bush didn't do the right thing. I want to hear those who think he did all he could. And that's when the discussion ensues. Those are the kinds of discussions we have. One of the first questions I ask in class in the first day is what are the differences between white people and black people? And people sit there like they don't really know or they don't want to say. They're hair's different. Or their body composition is different. Or the food may be different. And the thing that trips them up every year and I've been teaching this course for fifteen years, the hair. Nobody wants to say why the hair is different. And there are very good, logical reasons why the hair is different and why is there a posterior in any black women that's absent in many women of European descent. The anthropologists disagree, but at least there's a theory out there. So those are - and the walk. How do black men walk? Come on, you know how Obama struts? Compare that to George Bush, so we have a lot of fun in the class. Both sides learn a lot. I have a student right now who is Caribbean, didn't have a clue about racism. Because she was in a country where everybody looked like her. She was appalled when I showed her a film that showed a sign saying colored restrooms here, white restrooms here. She says, what is that all about? I'll tell you what it's about. So that's the race in the courts class in the history department. My part time job, I have three part time jobs, is director pro bono at the law school. What we do is get law students involved in the community. We've had a

workshop for veterans and we have a national award for that from the American Bar Association. We go up to Pembroke to help the Lumbee Indians, we have a program where we have helped students coming out of foster care and going into the community. We're starting a prisoner reentry into the community program. We do expungements for people with certain items on their criminal record that can come off and it appears that they've never been there. We have - oh I can go on and on about the project we develop. At the law school to get students interested. I have a very good body of students that really want to serve this community, cause that's what it's all about. I try to embody in them don't worry about the money, if you're good enough the money will come, but serve your people. Especially saying that to the black students, saying you've got to help your people. But to everybody I say, you got to help your people. It's just endemic in our profession. Once you let money govern what you want to do, then you're in trouble. You take shortcuts.

**Q: [00:23:06] What do you think is the biggest challenge facing the Wake Forest campus today?**

[00:23:10] Getting administrators of color around President Hatch's table. We have had several opportunities to create a rainbow of leadership. And it just hasn't happened. To me, it's an abysmal recognition of where we are right now. This is 2014. And I doubt that there are other major universities whose academic standard is competent to ours is in the same deal. So that is where I'm very sore about right now that we don't have a black vice president. We have an associate provost. And that's fine. That's wonderful. That's also diversity and inclusion, where they always put us. We need to be in chemistry. We need to be in econ. We need to be in French. There are lots of black people - when I graduated from Wake Forest, I spoke Hindi. Dr. Gokle taught me Hindi. You just gotta look. You gotta do a little bit of outreach. Student affairs, who do we have over there as a head? Title nine coordinator. They just hired a woman. Seems like to me there was an opportunity to put somebody there of color. We gotta be more diligent about it. People get all upset about the word affirmative action, but the word affirmative action was never meant to put incompetent people in places where they had not earned the right to be. I'll say in a heartbeat, I was an affirmative action student, but you are not going to outwork me. You're not going to outwork me. I was a little upset that I didn't graduate magna cum laude, because I had put in the work, but I had also worked my way through college. And was involved in a whole lot of sit-ins, extra curricular. I could live with the cum laude.

**Q: [00:25:33] Do you think, when you look at the campus - and you've seen it over the last 30 years, what is the biggest change-**

A: [00:25:40] The biggest change is the rainbow effect within the student body. There were very few students here from China. I think I mentioned that earlier. I don't think there were any from Japan. And I love the exchange programs. We have a whole department that does that now. I think the film department gives us a whole new level of understanding. That was nowhere near being composed when I was in school. Now you all are touching topics that were taboo. So you're bringing new information to our student body, to our campus, in particular. The buildings, ok, are gorgeous. The campus continues to be a beautiful one, a very scenic one. In fact, it was listed as one of the top

ten in the nation for having that aesthetic charm during the fall. So I love the expansion in the campus, I just don't know where all the black people are in the work force. There's very few people working on the (?) now who are black. I just don't know what's happened. The big challenge is to get black leaders at the top who have decision-making authority.

**Q: [00:27:09] During your time at Wake Forest, have you had someone you consider a mentor or role model in any way?**

[00:27:21] There were several. See my mother and my grandmother were always people helping other people. When I was a little girl, I had to collect shoes for the children at the orphaned children's home. And my mother instilled in us that we were blessed and we had to share those blessings with others. Maya Angelou is another one who was always spreading the love and preached forgiveness, which was often hard to do. But she was - she mentored me in that area. You know, let some of this bitterness go. It's doing nothing but eating you alive. I'm trying to think if there was another. There were certainly people that I admired and Patricia Roberts Harris was one of them because she was the first black female ambassador to Luxembourg. [So I have always admired the role that she played in history. Shirley Chisolm was another one. And the great Barbara Jordan. Never heard her speak, you gotta turn on that online version of the democratic presentation to congress. It was awesome. A lot of people have gone before me and left their footsteps for me to follow. And that's what I try to do. If we don't help one another, irrespective of the color, our country is going to be in big trouble. The millennials have their way of doing stuff. The selfie stuff. I'll be glad when that passes. And maybe the next thing will be youfie stuff. I'm for youfie. Instead of selfie, you know what I'm sayin? We really need to get back to defining the concept of what is a neighbor. And do what we can because the blessings will flow through all of us. You know, I help you, you help her, she helps somebody else and it'll come back threefold. That's the way - that's what I was taught. And that's the way I try to live my life. The only issue is knowing when to say no because once you commit yourself to community projects and you do a good job, you get called on again and again and again, and while you're happy people recognize that you wanna help, at some point you have to recognize how much time this is taking away from my family. And when can I get my personal stuff? You have to stay balanced. Your family has to stay balanced in order to be of any use to an activity outside the home. And I say that to young mothers. So I think at 63, I think that I have done a lot, I'm not through, but I'm doing less. Because I'm bringing along other people that can be happy to do the other things that I would like to see done.

**Q: [00:30:32] What do you think has been your biggest contribution to Wake Forest and the Winston Salem community?**

[00:30:41] I would have to think upon that one, because I just do what I do and get it done. But I think my course, my race and the courts course has opened up a lot eyes on both sides of the table. Black students who did not know about restrictive covenants, white students that did not know that Fanny Lou Hanna was beaten in a jail. They don't know. I'll tell you who I introduce them to, other than Shirley Chisolm and Barbara Jordan. They don't know Paul Robeson; they don't know that Bill Russell refused to go

into the Hall of Fame. They certainly don't know about Curt Floyd or Isaac Murphy. I'm trying to think of a few more people - Wilma Rudolph. And it breaks my heart that they don't know - they really don't know Arthur Ashe. Or Althea Gibson. I think just enlightenment - the course has brought enlightenment. And then at the same time they get a study on how laws operate and how they can be interpreted. They also don't know early on, that Japanese and Chinese immigrants were quite unwelcome. They didn't grow up with expressions like we did. You know, anti-oriental. So those are the kinds of things` they learn and they learn how those expressions can deface people and be an affront to one's dignity. So if nothing else, they learn how to respect other cultures, even though they may not agree with - they learn how to be a little more sensitive to the way other people do things. Because you know people used to laugh at collard greens. And now, you know, that's the food on any big time New York restaurant you go to. So-

**Q: [00:32:47] In conclusion, are there any other experiences that you think we should know about that you went through during your time in Wake Forest?**

[00:32:54] Well, I thought it was interesting when I was the first homecoming queen, that people were very upset about it. I said homecoming queen; I'm not getting any money. There were some people that had said they would not come back to Wake Forest. And my paper, the Petersburg Progress index, refused to print the story that Wake Forest sent to the paper. Thought that was interesting. And the other experience that I finally had to let go but will never forget, was when my husband went to see his chemistry teacher, whom my husband felt - he was my boyfriend at that time - had misunderstood what Larry had written and how he deciphered the formulas, got the right result but went a different pathway. And he was given no credit. So I said, we need to go see that professor. You know, I'm the revolutionary. So we went to his house, because all the professors lived right there on Faculty Drive. And when we appeared at the front door, his wife would not let us in. She told us we had to stay on the porch. And when the professor came to the door, he allowed us to step inside in the foyer. But she guarded the living room to make sure that we did not step into her living room. And it's that look - you know that look that all of us know when someone is unhappy with us - and we stood there and talked to him. We finally got it resolved, but I thought that was very interesting that our presence in that woman's house caused her to be so uncomfortable, so that's just one of the things. A lot of other things we've tried to toss because it just makes you bitter and keep you from being happy. We always want peace in our lives, but you can't have piece if you're carrying bitterness.

Q: [00:35:19] Thank you very much.