University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives
Project 500 Oral History Project
Interviewee: Laouida Glover
Interviewer: Ellen Swain
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Ellen Swain: So this is an oral history interview for the University of Illinois Archives. Today is September 29, 2018. The interviewer is Ellen Swain, and I'm talking to Laouida Glover, who was an alumnus—is an alumnus from the University of Illinois, and we're going to talk about her time on campus as a student. So maybe we could start just with some background information: where you grew up, information about your pre-Illinois, University of Illinois days.

Laouida Glover: Okay, my life prior to coming to the University of Illinois started in Batesville, Mississippi. So I went to grammar school there, and I went to high school there, and I intended to go to Nebraska, to the University of Nebraska, because my mom had done some postgraduate work there. And she was very much involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Whenever Fannie Lou Hamer was unavailable, they sent for my mother all across the country.

So that summer, I was in Chicago, and she was moving about so we did not know that I had received the letter saying I needed an SAT test. I had only taken the ACT and that they required an SAT, so I ended up not being in college right after I graduated. And one day I was walking, I was in downtown Chicago, and I picked up a newspaper, because I just picked up information just to see what's—nosy. And it had a little bitty ad in it that said they were seeking 500 students to come to the University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana for free tuition and free school. And I'm like, 'Whoa, this sounds like something I'm interested in.' And it invited us over to Circle Campus on Saturday, and I went there and I got here, but that's how I got here.

But I had come from a little town in Mississippi—Batesville—which was the last train that stops, last stop in Mississippi before coming north. And so we always came to Chicago. As a matter of fact, I had gone to preschool up to kindergarten here in Chicago, and my mother moved her family back home to her home in Batesville, Mississippi. Our dad stayed here and she took us back home. And so I grew up in a Black community with an education that I thought was super sub, but it was very—in retrospect, I saw that I had come from a very rich background with a lot of care, concern, and learning a lot of things that I needed to know. So I came to the University of Illinois with my self-esteem totally intact. I was totally unaffected by being around 32,000 white kids. I had that background that came from that encouraged me. I was encouraged to be a lawyer from when I was a very little girl, and it was based on my personality and my sense of reasoning. And I had analytical skills that they saw, and they always—I was always encouraged, you know, so.

ES: Was that by your parents or teachers?

LG: My community.

ES: Your community.

LG: Yeah, my community. My mother raised all of her ten children to be who we were. You know, she was like fingers on hand. She didn't try to tell us what to do. She encouraged us to be a contribution to society. That was her line. But there were teachers and there were community relatives that saw me, and I don't know who, you know, who they were. I just remember them saying, 'You should just be a lawyer.' Well, they did say I'd argue with a signpost, and they thought that was a key element. [Laughs.]

Yeah, so that's kind of my background. Another thing I think that may be important to—in the shaping of who I am is that I had cousins, and they all pretty much most of the people went to college. My grandfather included, my mother. All of his siblings, the aunts and uncles, to my mother. They went to college. So I always—I love to get out and about. So whatever car was going and the trunk got in the car, I would go. So I was from college campus to college campus, and I think that may have had some influence on who I became by the time I was 18 and at the University of Illinois.

ES: And you said your mother was involved in the Civil Rights?

LG: Very much.

ES: What was her name?

LG: Her name's Thelma Thomas Glover Childress. And she's been noted in a book here, in a book there. I suppose probably people—some things like I'm doing now—people would come from Jackson State and Ole Miss and that kind of thing, to talk to her about her history. So she's been mentioned in a number of books because of her involvement.

She was the first Black woman, among the first Blacks—there were three Black people in my town, Panola County, Mississippi, that ventured out to be the first Blacks to vote. So despite the shotguns that was standing there with the troopers or whoever they were, intimidating us from daring to register to vote, she was the Black woman with all these children to feed who went and registered to vote. So she's in history because of that as well. But not only that, she did lose her job, they fired her as a teacher that day. And she went somewhere, and they hired her that same day as well. So.

ES: Wow. Wow.

LG: That's kind of who I was when I got here.

ES: Yeah, yeah. So you came on campus in the fall of 1968?

LG: Yes, on the train.

ES: On the train from Mississippi?

LG: No, from Chicago. I had been in Chicago. Yes, and based on my father, I was an Illinois resident, so I was not caught with out-of-state. Not only that, my father, as well as I, had been here at least a year. I don't know how long you had to be here, but my father was a resident.

ES: Did you know anybody on campus?

LG: No, no.

ES: But you say you weren't intimidated [crosstalk].

LG: It's interesting to me. I was not intimidated at all. At all. But growing up, we were very much involved. It was a Black, totally Black environment growing up. I have lived in a community, I was—in Chicago, it's easy for me to say, like, from Hyde Park to downtown, and it was, it was just Black. And then the teachers were 'Uncle this' and 'Auntie that,' and 'cousin this' and 'cousin that.'

And in my community, the people whose parents were not involved and maybe lived on some of the other Black people's land, and there was one white plantation owner, and it must have had five families. By the time I came to college, they—people like my grandfather—had begun to sell land and help people get, buy land and get to build a house off of the few plantations that were somewhere around. But that came up into my consciousness based on the fact that—I was thinking when you said, you know, who told me. And I was thinking of our community. And the people whose parents were not as involved, and perhaps had come from the plantation, or were not a part of our family, had every opportunity that all the rest of us had. It was really a community-based thing.

And my like, my mother's car, you know, it was kind of like people hanging out of it, to pick up, to go to things, and it didn't matter that their families were not—it's, to me as a child, looking at it, and with me as an adult, and now a family and community elder myself, the way I see it is the way I saw it. Was that everybody, they just reached out to everybody, and some of those children became community leaders when some people like myself left. And as they grew up, they became community leaders based on, in my opinion, people reaching out to them, people reaching out to families, and bringing everybody along.

So that was the kind of community I had come from, and we were very much involved, and we did everything. We were the 4-H club. We were the home economics for the community, I mean, the school

extracurricular activities. We were the presidents and the secretaries and the leaders and the doers for presenting whatever it was that was to be presented. And I think it's, you know, I just—who was I going to be intimidated by? You know, I had spoken at colleges and universities in Mississippi because we had oratorical contests and all that kind of thing.

ES: I see.

LG: And the professors, I had several professors who just kind of wanted to call me and after class, but, you know, to kind of ask me who I was. And I think it probably showed that I just was, you know, I speak up in the classes, and I wasn't concerned about the other people. I just was coming out of who I am, you know, so I wasn't affected by who was around me. That's, you know, necessarily, I was never intimidated.

ES: I see. Talk about those first months when you were in school. What was the climate like, and did you participate in the sit-in in September?

LG: What happened in, I think, September 9th or something like that.

ES: Yeah, 10th.

LG: Well, we had been down here for a week in advance, and we all stayed together at ISR. And the way I saw it, once we got our rooms, a lot of the students had to stay in lounges. Somebody said they were in some kind of closet or something, and all that. I did have a room at Busey Hall. But there was a call for us to come to the Union for, I think a meeting, you know, I'm supposing about it. I might have heard a meeting. Whoever told me, somebody else might have told somebody else a sit-in, and somebody may have—I don't know what people said, but I heard to come for a meeting, because there was a discussion about this situation, that once we got disbursed among the facilities at the at the host big campus, some people were very, very dissatisfied because they didn't have rooms.

And so, because we're Black, we're getting stuck in the lounge and that whole kind of thing. But I think that, in retrospect, the University knew that, in time, that there—all these students that never said they're not coming, but they weren't, they didn't come, that rooms would open up. It's my understanding that rooms would open up. But I don't think that it hit. And the University officials did not come and speak to us and say, 'Let me explain. You know, this is—this can—this is going to be resolved and that it will work out.' So we kept thinking all night, all night, that the President or the Chancellor or somebody was coming to speak to us, and what we saw was the police.

But yes, I was here. Right here in the Union when it happened. And actually, after—I don't know if the police had showed up or they, some of the students got angry, but I was involved in the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi. I'd had training in what to do in the event that there was some attack or

something, and our whole thing was nonviolence, so I just wanted to know who these people were that were damaging the Union building. 'Don't they know that your parents are going to kill you? Don't you know you're going to get beat like a slave? What are you—what are you all doing?'

And I was crying. I was so upset. I'd never seen anything like it before, and so I was very upset. But and then the police came and helmets and, well, I'd seen all this on TV and the like, but I had never been attacked in the whole Civil Rights Movement, and I had gotten involved when I was 13, and we'd gone off for training for all that. And I'd been to the SCLC convention at age 13 down in Savannah, Georgia, and I just had, I seen the TV, the news. And my mother had been involved, and she had to step up when Fannie Lou Hamer was once being beaten. And, you know, she stepped out and started praying. Her message was love. Love is the answer, and that's the way, you know, she told the story, and—but I had never seen anything like this. And then they made us get into the back of trucks, you know, and took us to jail, and I had never known anything about that.

ES: So you were in jail?

LG: Yeah, I was also in jail. And I must have gotten out the next day around noonish, late in the morning. Yeah, so. I wasn't scared. I just was happy to be out. And I think Professor Quick, at the law school, Charlie Quick was a Constitutional Civil Rights professor. He—that's what he taught, I don't know if he was that kind of lawyer or not, but that's what he taught. And as far as I knew, he'd got us out of jail. So he was probably the lawyer that was most prominent in that effort.

ES: So what happened after that? I mean, soon after that—

LG: After that, we went to class. [Laughs.]

ES: Yeah? [Laughs.]

LG: We went to class and tried to stay in school. We went through the harrowing process of being registered. That was in the old day. Boy, oh boy, oh boy. They needed computers just for that. [Swain laughs.] But you know, we went through the harrowing experience of getting registered for the classes and learning. Oh, that's closed and it's closed, so then you have to walk back, then you have to go across campus and all of that. That was—that was what we did, but I think—

ES: Was that in the Armory at that point?

LG: Yes, yes, yes. But I think that week in advance of the regular registration, when all the students were here, really helped us to have a bond. And that was one of the most striking things that has lasted with me, I suppose, other than being qualified to get to work because of the education, that was probably the most striking thing about it, to me. It was really, really, really a warm experience being a Project 500

student here. The kids who had been here before we got here, the Blacks, you know, were so happy to have us, because, I suppose it was a lonely place.

Because we were, you know, to me, I think we were largely ignored by the white kids. However, I was only in Busey Hall until the second semester, and I was pledging—my big sister thought I should pledge in the room, she was my roommate. And I didn't think I was supposed to pledge in the room, like all rules, bets are off now, you just a roommate. All that Delta stuff is, you know, you really think so. And so I ended up moving in the second semester. But my reason I brought that up is because I was voted Miss Busey Hall from that little short time to—I don't know what that meant, but you know, I always wear my little Miss Busey Hall crown, because otherwise I never been any beauty anything.

But I said that to say that I felt ignored, but apparently, because there were probably 20, 25 in Busey-Evans—because we shared, we'd have food together in one cafeteria—and, but they, majority of the people voted me Miss Busey Hall, so maybe I was less ignored than I thought. [Laughs.] But I didn't feel any, a lot of camaraderie. So I would think—

ES: With the white students?

LG: Yes. And so I would think they were very happy that we were here, because we were, they were very warm and it was, you know, a bond among the Black students.

ES: And you maintained that friendship through all four years and then afterwards?

LG: Yes, I was just last week talking to Judge David Atkins, who I would ride home with sometimes to Chicago. And I was just telling, mentioning a few things to him about that. But yeah, though they were the upper classmen who had been here when we got here, and who had worked, I'm sure, with the University to get us here, to do something after Dr. King died and things opened up in 1968. Very, very powerful year in history. Yeah. So not only did this happen for us, but a lot of things were going on. Change was in the air.

ES: You talked about joining a sorority. Why did you do that? What motivated [crosstalk].

LG: All the girls that I thought—that I was gravitated to pledged the sorority that I pledged. We had a line of 26, 27—26 I do believe—girls pledging Delta Sigma Theta. And I was an organization type person.

ES: You were talking about that a little bit. What other things did you do?

LG: I was a part of BSA.

ES: Were you?

LG: Yeah, I was, again, I was active at Busey Hall. I—what else did I do? That's about it. I was—played cards downstairs in the basement. I learned how to count those 13 cards to play bid whist. And I had a—

ES: [Laughs.] To play what?

LG: Bid whist.

ES: Bid wiz.

LG: I don't know how, you know, we just—bid whist, I don't know if it's whist, wiz, wits, or what it is, but it's a, it's a card game, and we played a lot downstairs. I think it's called the commons. But what was not apparent to everybody is that when it was time for my class, I was there. I had did lots of partying on the weekends or whenever there was a party, and I had a full social fun life, but I went to my classes and I turned my papers in on time.

I did what I was supposed to do, because I always knew I wanted to go to grad school. I thought I wanted to be a psychologist, and I probably did. I was a psychology major, but I was involved. I was very much involved. As a matter of fact, my major was community psychology. What do you do to keep people mentally healthy? Because I didn't like the reactionary side. It's so much so that I was really attracted to that.

When that major opened up, I was, 'Oh, yes, that's me.' So I was very much involved in developing programs, projects, activities, and associated with—my sorority had a connection with the community. So I was able to go out and deal with idea of community garden, after school programs, that kind of thing. I was—I had took four-hour psychology classes, developing projects. So.

ES: I wanted to ask you about that too, how important the Champaign Urbana community was to you as a U of I student, and particularly the African American community.

LG: Well I was only connected to the African American community. I don't know anything at all about the white community or any other aspects of the community. But I was project director in the sorority. I was project director. So not only did I have classes, independent study classes, that I designed programs and projects for that were in the community, connected to schools, and the not-for-profit organizations that were doing something with children in the community.

So I developed a program that the, whoever was over the community center, was very happy to have the University involvement. So I developed a project that was after school, so four days students could do what their interest was, because I used all the majors that were in the sorority, because we're service

sorority, so I used all the majors. So there was someone who did design in the theater department, so kids that wanted to sew or design things, they would go to her. There were people that wanted to do different sports, the people—so that the people that were in in physical education, they had the baseball and spring, I can remember, and they did different things like that. And then on Friday, we all did Black history. They all had to come in, and we would do projects, and it can introduc—they would, different people would introduce different people in history and that kind of thing, and try to get an appreciation for who they are and who their, what their community was, and to get them started early in thinking contributing, being a positive contribution to society.

ES: And you did this through your sorority?

LG: Through the sorority, connected the sorority to my classes. I had these independent study classes.

ES: I see, so, I see.

LG: Yeah.

ES: Wow, that's amazing.

LG: That kind of thing. Yeah, so that was my only connection to the Uni—to the community, but I was connected in that way.

ES: So this is a question getting back to kind of protests again. Do you think protest tactics or philosophies related to Project 500 differ from those used in other protests at the time? Or can you compare what was done back then to how students are protesting today at all? Are there any connections there?

LG: Well, I think that the protests that I have seen in this country, as well as what I have seen historically when I've paid attention only through—I've never had any formal study or very sophisticated study of protest, but I do pay attention to public television and the women's movement and the worker's movement and that kind of thing. And it seems to me there's pretty much the same, except now we have social media, and word can get out, and people can crop up much more quickly, and the reach is far more expansive than it was.

So it's probably much more organized when I was a young teenager into my young adulthood, and movements were happening and protests were happening. Now, I think it's less organized and it's more splintered. And I know in my community, because my daughter is 26, and she's been—she wanted, you know, she's kind of wanted to be in her grandmother's shoes or stand for whatever. You know, she knows that her grandmother stood for. And from what I can tell, I don't see the kind of organizing around it. I don't see the same kind of leadership that there was because we had SNCC, CORE, SCLC,

NAACP, and it was very, very organized. And I don't know that—I'm not close to it, I've not been involved.

I was taught, when I left here and went over to the law school that the law is a jealous mistress, and she will have no other. And that's been my experience. Because my daughter was born close to the time that I started practicing law, and I am a single mother, never married. And so I had to take care of her, that meant I had to take care of the house, and then here I am, bamboozled with all of this that it takes to run a law practice and for the people whose problems, by the time they come to the lawyer, is nothing in comparison to when I represented corporations. And there was one problem that, you know, someone sued right away, and that's it. Not all of these things that individuals come with when they when they decide that they better hire a lawyer.

So it's—I've not had the time to be able to really get involved in as many things as I did when I first left the University. I was 42 when my daughter was born, so I had really been involved in and I didn't pass the bar exam right away. So 17 years later, I went back and studied for the bar exam, went with the firm and then that started practicing law. But during those earlier years, I had really done the things that I really wanted to do, but I didn't see it as an income. It was mostly volunteering. I was president of my Area Council, and so that gave me a seat on the Regional Council in South Shore in Chicago. And I was very much involved. I was very much involved in arts and the development of people that I really connected with, who were artists.

I'm really, if I would say where am I from in Chicago, I'd say the arts community. So I did a lot of work with developing arts, and I had a consulting firm, and never had a paying client, so that, you know, to in terms of working with artists to help artists understand that there is a business aspect to their passion of making art and producing, being creative, that there was this business side that needed to be developed, and to think of themselves as businesspeople, as opposed to just hustling artists. And so that's—I did that kind of community development on that side and developed a program that turned into a major Jazz Festival in Chicago, and saving the South Shore Country Club Park. I don't know somebody's going to interview Raynard, but Raynard Hall came to me in the early days because they wanted to tear down that beautiful, beautiful facility on 71st Street and the lakefront. And so we decided to—[Unclear] remember exactly where I was.

ES: Yeah, you were, you were talking about some of the things you did after you graduated from college in Chicago and your career, and I wondered, you know, how you thought the university influenced what you did. It sounded like you really kinda knew what you wanted to do when you came, but I wondered if it—

LG: I didn’t know.

ES: Not really?

LG: Yeah, I knew, well it was psychology, well psych—are we back on? Well psychology had actually been my personal direction, even though I had this in my head, be a lawyer, be a lawyer. Psychology was my personal direction because I was—people always found it so easy to talk to me about their problems. And I grew up in a community that I thought was very gossipy, but I never, that was never an interest of mine. And so, I thought people would talk to me because they knew they would never hear it again, and I always said that you can always feel free because I'm gonna forget it. It's not my business, and I really, you know, all I want to do is be helpful if I can. And if you need some to discuss—so I wanted to do psychology and therapy, but then I knew I didn't want to be on the negative end. I wanted to be on the positive end. So community psychology was a much better fit. And so when I left school, I got really, got involved in community work and getting people involved, developing the community in ways that I thought were important.

So when this effort came to stop the city or the park district from tearing down—this is a beautiful edifice that was a country club. And so the whole area here had been locked off, and Blacks were not involved, I think it was Jewish. People remember, like Raynard Hall remembered, peeking through as a kid to see what was going on back behind the gated area that was the country club. Well, we were like, 'Oh no, you can't just tear this down and put a cinderblock field house there.' So we got involved. And everything that I had learned and studied at the university was able, as well as my background when all the kids came from the major universities to be involved in the Mississippi, I mean in the Freedom Riders.

They came in when I was a girl, and they introduced us to all kinds of things, all kinds of information. We had discussions on things that were very, very exciting. Because the big thing that happened during that time is that I suppose the companies like the Monsanto's or somebody came in and had this product that would kill the weeds, but the cotton would grow. So instead of us having to work all year long chopping cotton, then you get a little bitty break, and then you start having to pick the cotton, and then you got to go to school and pick the cotton, it was all open because once they planted the cotton, we didn't have to chop the weeds away from the cotton. That opened up for us to work on—so these kids were coming from the Northern and the Eastern universities down to, and got dispersed throughout the South, and they were giving us freedom classes, which covered all kinds of things. And then we also didn't have to work the fields, so we were free to work the Civil Rights Movement. So we went out and registered voters for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. When we did that, the 1968 convention in Chicago, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic unseated the regular democrats at the convention, and that was because of all that work.

Well, when I graduated college, actually I graduated law school when I went back to Chicago. I was naturally involved and had been a community psychology major, so the things that I had learned here impacted me in a very, very significant way. So I didn't pass my bar exam, so I was free to do—I had a job with the EEOC in employment discrimination, which was also my area of interest. And then all of

this neighborhood work that I became a leader in just fit into what I had learned, and my basic background of growing up as a child in the Civil Rights Era, all played into what I did as a volunteer. So I didn't earn money doing it, and I didn't see psychology, which was my undergraduate major, as an income source. So I didn't set myself up—like the children today know about entrepreneurship and know to do these things. I just was there consulting with no paying clients [Swain laughs].

So that's kind of how the university impacted what I did, because I had the experience with independent study classes in psychology. As well as I really had a background in— we had nothing if we didn't make it happen. And my mother was key. She had gone off to high school, and went to Rust College, and lived in Chicago, and moved back to Mississippi. And she developed the events. I remember her at our grammar school, she was the one that would come up with the carnivals and the different things that we would do for fun. And then me and my cousin was over the 4-H Club. It was just very different than what I have seen dissipate in our community. Once I went back to law and I took my bar exam after 17 years, and passed the bar, it's good I spent those years doing what I wanted to do. I see that I was doing what I wanted to do, that I would do for free. And I missed it by dealing with the law, which is not as fulfilling to me as working in the community, you know, and seeing kids that are now adults come to me like 'Oh, you were just so wonderful. I remember we did this and we did that and—.' I miss my calling. [Laughs.]

ES: Well thank you so much for talking to us.

LG: My pleasure.

ES: This was wonderful, thank you.

LG: Thank you for having me.