

University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives

Interviewee: Judy Coonce

Interviewer: Delaney Bullinger

Length: 00:12:32

10/27/2017

Delaney Bullinger: So, what is your name?

Judy Coonce: My name is Judy Coonce.

DB: And when did you graduate from U of I?

JC: In May of 1977. So this is my fortieth-

DB: Wow.

JC: Anniversary year.

DB: Awesome. And are you affiliated with the university right now?

JC: I live in Michigan and with some other people we are trying to get a West Michigan Illini Club off the ground. So we are kinda sorta affiliated that way and I stay active in the Sigma Kappa sorority that I joined here. But other than that, no I'm not affiliated.

DB: Awesome. No, that's awesome. Alright. And what do you want to talk to us about today?

JC: Well, the thing that I thought was interesting about my experience here at Illinois, one of many. I had a good time. Is that in 1975, my sophomore year, I lived at Clark Hall and at that time it was a kind of experimental dorm in that we didn't have any RA's, we governed ourselves, that kind of thing. And for spring semester, at that time we were on semesters, I had a Black roommate. And at the time, I was told that I was the first white woman to have a Black roommate. I kind of found that shocking for 1975. I thought it would happen sooner than that. But I had a lovely woman, I'm not gonna give her name because I feel like that's her story. But we were, and we have lost contact with one another over the years. But we got along great. We really did. I finally had somebody my same height and size. It was terrific [laughter]. And I learned a lot that semester about myself, about race relations, and about people in general. It was a real eye-opening experience.

The one funny thing that I will never forget is a trustee of the university came unannounced on like a Saturday night, okay. And both of us were in bathrobes getting ready to go out for the evening, okay. Well you know, and I mean this is 1975. No cellphones, no nothing. You know,

people just walked into dorms, right. So she knocks on the door and she comes on in. And we're so like, you know, "Hi." You know. Holding our robes shut. You know, "Make yourself at home." [Laughter] What are we supposed to do? And I can remember her sitting down on the chair that we offered her and crossing her legs and putting her hands over her knee and looking at us very earnestly. And saying, "Now, tell me. How are you two getting along?" And my roommate, who really did not have a whole lot of patience for this kind of silliness, looked at her just as earnestly and said, "Oh, we're fine. We're as good as fudge ripple ice cream" [Laughter].

And I was like, "This is a trustee. This is not the time to be smart mouth" [Laughter]. But it was so funny. Anyway, we did have a good conversation with this dear woman who was probably just doing her job. We did have a good conversation, and I did get to my date on time, which was important. But anyway, but no it was enlightening and like I said I couldn't believe that it took until 1975 that they had a mixed-race roommate situation.

The other story I thought you might be interested in, are you interested in-

DB: Yes.

JC: One more story?

DB: Yes, absolutely.

JC: Okay. That also happened my sophomore year, but it happened in the fall. I went through rush. My freshman year, I wasn't for sure about rush. Then I thought, "Oh, I'll go through rush and see about the sorority thing." And so I went through rush but oh my gosh it was just so packed, and it was so many people and just so, it was just wild.

Well then there was an article in the DI talking about wanting a new sorority on campus. And at that time there was no Sigma Kappa. And that's the sorority my sister belonged to at Western Illinois University. So I was like, "Now that would be fantastic if there was Sigma Kappa here." So I called my sister and I said, "Sue, how about Sigma Kappa here at Illinois like there is at Western?" She says, "I'm on it. I'll call." So she calls the national organization and they were like, "Well, Sigma Kappa *was* at Illinois until the mid 60s." So they're like, "If they're ready for us to come back, we're ready." So I dropped out of rush and stayed in contact with my sister and there was another woman on campus, Shirley Shafer[?], who was also interested in this. So we started going to all the pan-hel meetings every week going, "We're ready to be Sigma Kappas. We're ready to be Sigma Kappas." And doing what we could to communicate between my sister and national and all of that kind of thing. And lo and behold by February we had a Sigma Kappa chapter on campus.

And unfortunately the chapter closed a year or so ago but we're hopefully going to be coming back in about five or six years. Cause it is, it started like way back. Like in the early 1900s a chapter started here so it's kind of been here then went off in the sixties when everything blew up with the Vietnam War and then it, now it's gone off again for whatever problems they were

having so we're hoping that we can come back. Cause it is one of the oldest chapters of the national sorority. So I'm hopeful we can come back. But that was the other thing that I was kind of instrumental in doing and when I would come back to Illinois I'd be like, "Something's here because I was here." And that was, you know, I don't know. Just gave me a sense of a pat on the back.

DB: Yeah. Was the enrollment popular after you had created, helped in creating the chapter?

JC: Oh yes. Yes. It was. Really the chapter did very well for 38 years, you know. And what's even more important than whether or not the chapter did well is those are the people that I'm still in contact with today. Those women are my sisters. I lost my biological sister to cancer 15 years ago. My sorority sisters are there for me and are with me. And I appreciate them so very much. And those are the people after, with all of the different people I was involved with at Illinois, my sorority sisters, and my husband, the other guy I met at Illinois, are the ones that I've kept most in touch with.

DB: Yeah, how did you meet your husband?

JC: Oh, how did I meet my husband? Okay. Well, that was through, I was involved in Campus Crusade for Christ here on campus and so was he. He was like my best bud that I was in one of those horrible long-distance relationships. And back then it was even worse than it is today because it was all snail mail and long-distance phone calls which cost an arm and a leg. So that was horrible. He was just a really good friend that I just dumped on all the time and gave him all my [laughter] told him all my problems about this relationship and everything. And he was like, "Yeah, yeah, when is this gonna get over with," you know.

And then when it did finally break up, he was like, "Well let me take you to this square dance to help cheer you up." And to tell you the truth, I was horrified because I'm tall and so whenever we had square dancing during junior high and high school, I always had to be a boy because if it was uneven. And so I thought, "I've never danced the girl's part, I've only done the boy's part, and now I'm gonna be taken to a square dance? This is great." But I was like, "Alright, fine, I'll go. And hopefully I won't lead." So we went, we had a great time, and we just started dating after that. Dave's an engineer so Dave graduated from here in December of 1978. We got married in August of '78 so we lived in married student housing which was yet another wonderful experience and then he graduated in December of '78.

DB: And what did you study while you were here?

JC: I studied psychology with a concentration of social work is the way my major was worded. But my degree is LAS.

DB: Okay.

JC: And I never really had a career. I had worked as a social worker at Red Cross with their service to military families and veterans until I started having children and then I became kind of a full-time mom. But I did, you name it, I've done volunteer work. Sometimes I feel like I should put carny worker on my resume because I've, you name it. I've sold hot dogs to help build our church, I've spun cotton candy for the PTA, I've [laughter] done bake sales. I mean it's gotten to the point where my children when they were little, if they saw a pregnant woman walking down the street they said, "Mom when are you taking a meal over to her?" And I'm like, "I don't know her." "Well, she's pregnant. You take meals to everybody who's pregnant." And I'm like, "Well that's true." So I've done a lot of activism, a lot of volunteer work, that a lot of organization thing. But pretty much with the way my husband's job has been, I've mostly taken care of the fam.

DB: Yeah.

JC: It's mostly been my job.

DB: Awesome. One last question.

JC: Sure!

DB: Did any of your daughters go here?

JC: No, unfortunately. With living in Michigan, the out of state tuition was just way out of our budget range. So, I actually though had my oldest went to Grand Valley and she has her master's from Cornerstone University. She's an English learning language teacher for the Zeeland public school system in elementary schools. My middle daughter has her Doctorate of Physical Therapy and she got that from Ohio State.

DB: Wow, rival.

JC: I know. I know. And then my baby, she has a business degree from Northwood University which is in Michigan. It's a business school. It's a four-year degree but it's all business. And that's my baby. Don't, you know, interrupt her with English or math or something like that. Just if I want a business degree that's all I want to study is business so that's what she did. But yeah, our family, my dad went to Ohio State, we moved to Michigan when my daughter was only six months old. We're Illinois fans. And she's been in Michigan since she was six months old. The only school she ever wanted to go to was Ohio State, so it must be a genetic thing. And then my sister-in-law went to Purdue. Her son is at Wisconsin. Let's see. Then of course we're Illinois and then my grandchildren like Michigan State. We all agree we hate Michigan.

DB: There you go [Judy laughs]. The commonality, good. Well thank you so much. This has been great.

JC: Oh good. I hope you've enjoyed it.

