

Connecticut College

## Digital Commons @ Connecticut College

---

Alumni Oral History Project

Linda Lear Center for Special Collections &  
Archives

---

2024

### Tonisha Haendiges '12-Christina "Mobile" Burrell '11

Tonisha Haendiges  
*Connecticut College*

Christina Burrell

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/oralhistory>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Haendiges, Tonisha and Burrell, Christina, "Tonisha Haendiges '12-Christina "Mobile" Burrell '11" (2024).  
*Alumni Oral History Project*. 34.

<https://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/oralhistory/34>

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by the Linda Lear Center for Special Collections & Archives at Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Alumni Oral History Project by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. For more information, please contact [bpancier@conncoll.edu](mailto:bpancier@conncoll.edu).

The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

**Streaming audio for this oral history is available at**  
<https://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/oralhistory/34>

**Tonisha Haendiges:** Alright. Hello, my name is Tonisha Haendiges, class of 2012. Today is June first, 2024 and I am here to interview ...

**Christina "Mobile" Burrell:** My name is Christina Burrell, but most people on campus know me as Mobile, like Alabama, Baby! Let's go! And I am class of 2011.

**TH:** Thank you, Mobile, for being here today with me and letting me interview you. So, I do know Mobile, but I am going to act like I really don't know her, because I don't know her as well as well as some people do, so I'm curious to know the answers to some of these questions. So, the first question is why did you decide to come to Connecticut College?

**CMB:** That is a great question. So I am originally from Alabama, right outside of Mobile, and I actually came to Conn as an escape. My mother died, actually, about four months before school started and I was, like, I am not trying to be in Alabama or anywhere near here and I went to a boarding school in Alabama and one of the recruitment staff from Connecticut College was good friends with one of our counsellors at Alabama School of Mathematics and Science, where I was a student, and they were, like, "We need folks from the South. We don't have as much of a representation from the South at Connecticut College and we really want to diversify our student body." And so a friend of mine, Courtney Craig and I were set to come up here for prospective student weekend and my friend ended up going to a different school for their prospie weekend instead and I came here and I met this amazing group of people. And there were, like, several students from class year '09, 2010, 2011 that I met here and I was, like, I can see myself here. This would be pretty cool. And I didn't have a specific idea of what I wanted to study but I knew I wanted to work with people and everyone that I talked to was, like, "Well, Psychology and Human Development, that's the way to do that." And I was, like, alright, cool. Say less, let me do that. And so I decided, like, one, I needed to get out of the South and away from a lot of the different traumas that I had experienced and, like, the heartbreak of my mother passing away from cancer at the time and just really wanted to be in a space that was completely new with completely new people and completely new experiences and Connecticut College offered that opportunity for me. And I was, like, alright, I'm coming here. Here we are.

**TH:** Wow. Wow, that's amazing, actually. I didn't know the full details. Wow. Alright, what, if anything, surprised you about the College during your time here?

**CMB:** Yeah, so, the person interviewing me just shared this, but I will also share that, but it was very, very not diverse, the way I expected. Like, people came to my school, they were like, "Yeah, come to Conn! We have all these folks from different backgrounds and different experiences and different identities, and international students!" And I was like, alright, I guess I'll be there. And I got to campus for -- I forget the name of it right now, I think there were two different programs for folks who identified as people of the global majority, or, people who were minorities, and they were able to come to campus a few days early. And I moved, by myself, from Alabama and, like, shipped my boxes up here. And I came to Connecticut College and I ran into this kid, Welbith Mota, who saw me, like struggling to

carry these massive boxes from the library, or from the postal office to Jane Addams, where I lived, which is the opposite end of campus. And he was, like, "Yo, do you need I ride?" and I was like, yes, please, God, I can't carry this stuff. And that was, like, the earliest and, probably, only experience of community support that I experienced in my first, like, week here. And I ended up in that program, which was through Unity House, which was really, really clutch, and really made me able to stay here and do my full career, undergraduate career, at Connecticut College. But I had, like, this wealthy, white roommate who, as soon as she and her mom got into the dorm, they were, like, "How dare you choose your bed without consulting my daughter." And I was like, bro, I just needed a place to sleep for, like, the night, bro. I didn't even, like, dare to do anything, what do you mean? And I didn't have, like, any advocates in my corner. And, so, I remember relying heavily on the team at Unity House to be like, yo, so how do you navigate this environment where there's so much entitlement and, like, isolation as a chocolate baby from the South, who, like, is really not used to this affront to my identity. And so, I think for me it was really surprising to come into a space that was really predominantly white and very, very wealthy. Like, it was- I had been in predominantly white spaces before, where people try to hush-hush hide their wealth. But here, it was very much in your face, very different to my experience and so I was very- it was a culture shock, really in all the ways, of coming to this place. And yeah I think everything about Connecticut College surprised me, honestly. It was different.

**TH:** No, that's- that's real. That is really real. Where did you live and what was your residential experience?

**CMB:** So, my freshman year, I lived at JA, in Jane Addams and that was in South Campus. It was known as a party dorm. I was not a party person. I was very, very ... like, I went to bed at 7:30. 7:30 or 8:00 pm was my regular bedtime. I went to a boarding school that was all about academics before I came here, so I was very much used to being in community with similar folks. And so when I was at JA, I think the first house meeting we had, which was when everyone came to campus, they asked how long folks had been here and what they had done and I was in the- I think it was the Explorer Program for Black and Brown students and I spoke up about how that experience was really helpful for me coming from the South and not knowing any other Black or Brown folks who were on campus. And the first response was, "I don't understand why they have that program. Like, you should just be here with every other student. Why do you get to move in early? Why do you get, like, to have special programming?" And I was, like, whoa, whoa, bro, I need this because I'm like coming from the South, like the poor South with, like, people who don't look like me, everywhere around me I can see there's a sea of white faces in my dorm. And it was just, like, very uncomfortable living in JA, because was, like, really about the partying. I was not. Everyone was very, very wealthy and white. I was not any of those things. My roommate definitely was feeling out of place as well and she ended up actually transferring halfway through our first semester. So I ended up in a room by myself, which was kind of weird. Like, it was nice to live by yourself, but I was coming to college for the experience of having, like, roommates and, like, community and folks to interact with. And I was really isolated for a long time. But then I moved to Katharine Blunt. I moved next door to a good friend of mine, Andrene Burnett. And that was really clutch. I was, like, this feels like community. This feels like- these are my people. here Yo, wassup. And then after that I lived in Morrisson for a year and then another dorm in the Plex, because, man that air conditioner was clutch. I needed that. I needed that. I'm from the South, bro. We have central air and, like, all the

other dorms were, like, hot. They were hot. They were hot. But, yeah, the residential experience was pretty cool. I really loved having the community with- we had what was called Camelympics and there were- basically it was 24 hours at the time that you start from literally like 1:00 pm one day and you end 1:00 pm the next day and you have, like, 3:00 am basketball and 4:00 am dodgeball and all-night sit and touch a pole. And you did that as a dorm community. And so, like being able to get together and, like, make chants and make posters and we got, like sweat pants and shirts and stuff. And we got headbands that matched. It was, like, this reminds me of, like, being in boarding school. I love this! That's wassup! So, residential life was, like, a mixed bag. It was very much a learning experience and a learning curve for a lot of people, like, for the first time being away from home, living in community, having to get used to that. Like, cleaning up behind yourself and, like, recognizing you're in a shared space, but it was also a great opportunity to build connections and experiences together that was, like, very new to me in a college setting. So it was- it was pretty clutch. I wouldn't trade it for anything.

**TH:** Thank you sharing that and reminding me about Camelympics. That was- that was fun. That was a lot of fun. Alright, what did you study and do you have memories of classes or professors that stand out to you.

**CMB:** Yeah, so I double majored in Psychology and Human Development and I definitely have specific memories of being in Professor Michelle Dunlap's class. She ended up actually being my faculty advisor. I had come in to the College from the boarding school environment thinking, "I'm going to do the hardest everything possible. I'm going to challenge myself." And so I signed up for this reading-intensive freshman seminar, where we were reading, like, a book a week and, like, reporting out on it, and, like, doing all this other stuff and it just became quickly unsustainable for me. And so I talked to my advisor at the time and she was, like, "I think this lady, Michelle Dunlap, will have a good impact on you." And I was, like, alright, introduce me. And so she introduced me to Michelle Dunlap and I think that was a blessing in so many different ways. Michelle Dunlap introduced me to the poetry of Tupac, not just the music of Tupac. And I distinctly remember being in a conversation with her, the first conversation I had, and she was like, "Do you know about the rose that grew from concrete?" And I was, like, no, tell me more. And she told me about Tupac's poem about this rose that grew in concrete and how people were staring in, like, amazement at this- like, the tenacity of this rose to actually come through an environment that was not made for it to be successful and that it did so anyway and I was, like, that kind of feels like my whole college experience and I'm only a freshman right now. I'm like that little rose trying to come through the concrete right now. I like this. But the classes in Human Development were very eye opening to just, like, the human experience. I was able to do research my freshman summer with this colleague Penney Jade Beaubrun, who- we did the ConnSSHARP research experience, and so we studied what it was like for social service providers to enter the homes of Black and Brown families and what perspectives they had on those families and then how that guided how they then interacted with them if their- they recommended children being removed or they recommended services. And all of that came from being in Professor Dunlap's class and, like, being able to have the experience of service learning, and really at its core, actually being service learning. Like, I did so much volunteerism that I was used to from my experience growing up as a Girl Scout and in my church and all that jazz, but I think Professor Dunlap's Human Development classes, were, like really clutch. And then Audrey Zakriski taught abnormal psychology and that was, like,

right, alright this is why I got into this work. Like, these are the diagnoses that I'm learning about. She actually hooked me up with my first summer job, that would be Wediko Children's Services and I to this day- I think that's the place where I learned the most outside of Connecticut College, that was through that experience at Wediko and just learning how to interact with kids who had severe trauma and behavioral and social-emotional needs and I think all of that stemmed from my studies in Psychology and Human Development at Connecticut College. So, Audrey Zakriski, Professor Dunlap, and the work in those courses were definitely standouts for me.

**TH:** That's amazing. They got the Psychology-Human Development department! Alright, were you involved in any groups or activities that were important to you?

**CMB:** Yes, so I tell people that I can't sit still and it's true. Like, I really can't. I had three or four work study jobs and also I was in Umoja and eventually was the president for Umoja. Me and a couple of friends, we did a step experience my first year and then we started the step club. That became an official club on campus and that was really important to me, because that was, like, right, like you want to do something that's fun and meaningful, not just to you but to a lot of people. And so we ended up getting the experience of organizing regular meetings and creating a whole, like, club contract and making it official through the SGA, the Student Government Association, getting a sponsor through Unity House, making sure we had, like, actual performances to do. I was able to set up different, like, in the community, performances that we went to. We actually went to Eastern Connecticut State University to do a step show there. And I think that was very important. It was just, like, and opportunity to, like, use skills that I had learned in high school and I was continuing to learn at Connecticut College to create something. And I'm a very creative person, so having that opportunity to use those creativity skills to build something important to me and that lasted many years beyond my time at Connecticut College was really cool. I also was involved in a bunch of different clubs and, like, working at the school. So I worked at the library for a while. I did babysitting for faculty and staff. I worked in the theater and that was really cool. I got to work with my friend Lamar and we got to, like, create sets and, like, set up sets and stage stuff for different performances and that was pretty cool. I was on the Student Government Association as a house representative for a couple of years through Katharine Blunt. Yeah, man, I did a lot of stuff. I was, like, I gotta- I gotta be out here doing stuff. I can't squander this experience. Like, I'm paying all of this money to come to this school, I'm going to do something with this. Yeah, I stayed involved.

**TH:** Yeah, you were booked and busy, okay? What was the campus climate like when you were here and do you remember any particular events or controversies?

**CMB:** Yeah, so one of those things that kept me busy, Unity House had created -- I'm going to butcher the name -- but, basically, it was this collective of students who were reading different material and doing these conversations that we would book on diversity, equity, and inclusion, which went by a different name at the time. But, basically, there were a few different controversies that happened, like, I remember there was a swastika that was drawn on a dorm room wall and then someone else's car got the word "queer" and "faggot" written on it and so we were crafting these conversations to say how can we make sure that the environment that we are all existing within actually feels good for people to be here, folks who are not of the dominant or majority groups. And so, I think, those experiences and

just like my own personal experiences- I remember a friend of mine Khana Riley Rebman was telling me about how she was walking down the sidewalk and this white man, like, saw her, another student, and, like, refused to move. And so she ended up, like, full on, like, shoulder checking with this guy and he just, like, would not relent any space for her on the sidewalk and that, just like, hearkened a lot of ideas. Again, I'm from the South, right? And so you- there's clear indications of who should own the space that you're in. And having that conversation with her, who's also from Florida, being able to recognize that those experiences are still playing themselves out in the college setting. I think those were very important and influential for me, wanting to be in those conversations and leading the dialogues to be, like, here's how we can make a better space at Conn and then for you to continue to carry that on into the society that we are going to be living in as adults after our four years here. And so we ended up- I forget the incidents that created this whole situation, but the whole campus at one point shut down. Like, classes stopped. There was no clubs. All the cafeterias closed. And everyone was required to be in their dorm for this dorm-wide conversation that our group of folks then led the conversation around, because whatever the incident was, it was serious enough that they were like, no, we need to have a campus-wide dialogue about this, because that was very problematic. A thing for me that stood out, was, right, okay, so the administration at least- is at least putting some energy behind making sure that we're having the conversation if nothing else. They're, like, prioritizing, shutting down all of the operations so that all students can be at least told that you're required to be in these dialogues because it's that important. So that for me was very, very important to be involved in and, again, again I don't remember the specific circumstance that led to that, but then a lot of other things leading up to that, like the swastikas that we're being found around campus and the anti-LGBTQ circumstances that were happening around campus. There were a couple of things that, like, the N-word was written on a wall in, like, marker and had to be painted over. So, it was, like, a lot of, just like, very blatant, sort of in-your-face prejudice that was happening that really had to be addressed and I was really happy to be a part of the team that was leading those dialogues to- to address that.

**TH:** Wow. Thank you for sharing that. Can you talk a little bit about your life after Conn? How did your experience shape your life after graduation, if at all.

**CMB:** Yeah, so Conn like I said, there were a lot of opportunities for me to lead and create and I knew from my upbringing in Alabama that that was what I was born to do: was to create and to lead. I had done- in my high school I was the president of a mentor club. I had also created a couple of different initiatives in my college. Where we ended up having- my undergrad, sorry, my freshman year at my boarding school that we call puzzle time because I was very into puzzles, like, jigsaw puzzles and I was sitting by myself doing puzzles at the school after classes every day and, like, five people joined and then ten people joined and then fifteen people joined, and so we made this official, like, thing where we would have puzzle time on Wednesdays at, like 3:00 pm. And that was all borne out of me being, like, I like this thing; maybe other people will like this thing. And I was able to carry that over into my post-college life. I ended up joining- I went and got my grad degree in Social Work at Boston College and then I joined an organization that they were looking to revamp a program that was g- geared toward people in foster care and learning life skills and they had, like, ten different skills they were trying to teach and I was able to actually use my experience at Conn with creating the step program in collaboration with other colleagues to recreate the program at my current organization to make it more youth-centered and

focused on what would actually benefit the students who were accessing that program. And I think that was a direct result of being able to create something at Conn that was, alright, we want to make sure that people are interested in this, it's meeting the need, it's fun, it's engaging, and it's well organized. Because no one wants to come to something where you're like practice is at 3:00 and no one shows up until 4:30, so you really have to be on top of your game and I think a lot of those opportunities and skills at Conn translated directly into my work right after graduation, which was pretty cool.

**TH:** That is pretty cool. Do you keep in touch with classmates?

**CMB:** I do. There's a few different folks I've been in touch with. I'm not the greatest at keeping in touch. I don't really have social media like that. I haven't had Facebook in over a decade. I have Instagram, but it's, like, spotty at best, if I'm ever actually on there. So, I, like, see updates from folks who have, like, had children and who are married and, like, see those things from a distance. But the folks who I keep most in touch with were really those people who were instrumental in making sure that I was, like, able to actually finish my undergraduate career at Conn. So, a lot of- a lot of folks I met through Unity House are the folks who I still talk to today. So, this weekend, Connections Weekend, like, we're here with the fiftieth anniversary of Unity House and I'm here with four other folks who were directly impactful in my experience at Connecticut College. So, I keep in touch with folks not as closely as I would like to, but when we do connect it's, like, damn, brother, it's like we were just here yesterday, bro, like, you were, like, a down-to-earth, really solid human being. So I wish I kept more in touch with more people, but I definitely am in communication and in connection and, just, community with folks who were really instrumental with making sure that I was able to actually graduate through a good amount of turmoil that happened on this campus.

**TH:** Yeah, yeah. Alright, and last question, in thinking about the College today is there something from your experience that you wish students could have and is there something happening on campus now that you wish you could have experienced?

**CMB:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. So when I was at Conn there were a few things that I don't believe are happening currently. So, Camelympics I mentioned was a 24-hour affair. By the time I graduated I think they had cut it down to eight hours or ten hours or something like that. But it was- there was nothing like getting up at 3:00 in the morning and going to play basketball and, like, your professors are there and, like, dorm staff are there and College leadership was there. The president was there and 3:00 in the morning playing basketball. Like, who does that? The president of Conn Coll does that is who does that. Leo Higdon, shout out! What's up, bro! And I think that was a really clutch experience because it wasn't just about the academics, but really was about building community and connections in authentic ways that were really meaningful. I also really, really loved Floralia. I think that was an experience that was really cool. It was this, like, all-day campus party. They put out, like, sub sandwiches, like, tables-long of food, always had enough. It was, like, pull out your furniture from the dorms, pull out your tents and just have music all day. It was a whole full campus party vibe, which was really clutch after long semesters of hard work. Like, we put in the work, y'all, so we got to play hard too and it was definitely worth it. I think those two are the biggest experiences, but also we had what we called Thursday night events. And I don't know if they have those still, but Thursday night events were an opportunity to not just have

parties focused on drinking alcohol and dancing but to really create opportunities for folks where that wasn't necessarily their go-to thing. So, we would have, like, movie nights and game nights and opportunities to just engage with folks in ways that weren't necessarily your typical ways of engaging. There was a game room, I think, in Lambdin or maybe Larrabee, I forget exactly where it was. So, we would have, like, game nights with the pool table and ping pong and all these other, like, fun opportunities to connect with each other. And, yeah, I think lastly I definitely have to mention the LGBTQ Center and being to have, like, opportunities to learn about the history of queer identities in this country and being able to share, again, like, movie nights and book discussions and having speakers from different parts of the world come in and talk about their experience growing up in the eighties as a queer person who couldn't be out in their full identities to where we are today. I think that was just, like, really clutch and I don't know if those are still happening, but one opportunity that Connecticut College had was, I'm never going to remember his name, but he was a guy who used to go around and talk to KKK members and he would actually, like, build relationships with Klan members and then over the years he had several people who would give him their robes and their hoods because they renounced their membership in the Klan after getting connected with a Black man who, like, really was, like, "So, like, why are you doing this?" and, like, it really dug into the heart and the core of, like, why they had this sort of hatred in their heart and he was able to have them do a full 180. So being able to hear him speak and I was- that was the first time, the only time, I ever actually touched a KKK robe and, like, a hood and a, like, a grand wizard's- and, like, all this memorabilia from this time that, like, felt very distant but for someone from the South that is very present in my history and in my memory from my parents' experience of life in the South. But, like, those sorts of opportunities were very unique to the College campus. I just hope and wish for future students that they get those opportunities to really engage in those authentic ways as well.

**TH:** Wow, well thank you so much Mobile for all of your insight, sharing your experiences and that concludes our interview for today.

**CMB:** Sweet. Thank you.