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### Unity House Interviews 1

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Leslie Williams

Glidjy Dupont

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**Andre Robert Lee:** I am Andre Robert Lee. I went to Conn from 1989 to 1993 and I have many memories of Unity House. When I first got here Unity House was actually down the road, across the highway and I remember my first night here during orientation, there was a crazy, incredible dance party and at the time I was The Dancer on campus and then my buddy Ka- I came late to the second party and I walked and, like, Oh, here we go here's everybody] and look and see this whole crowd of people dancing around outside my house and said, "What's going on?" and my classmate Kareem Lawrence said, "They're tearing it up!" He had the Brooklyn style and not the Philly style off the block. I remember also us moving from the Unity House down across the highway up here to this house and we did a ceremonial walk to honor the change. That was really special to me. So it was really nice. I think that was my- the end of my freshman year. My sophomore year this building was built. But the one memory I have of this Unity House that I want to share is Warren Wells's room and being outside Warren Wells's room. Warren Wells was probably a senior when I was a sophomore and Warren cut hair. So all the Black guys every once in a while would be sitting outside Warren's room waiting to get their hair cut and it was such an incredible space of bonding, refuge, and escaping the campus because it was just a bunch of Black boys when they got their hair cut and it was just special and nice and beautiful and Warren kept us clean and fresh. When he graduated we all suffered for a little while. Barber don't go. Yeah, Unity House has meant so many things and those are just a few of the stories I wanted to share.

**Interviewers:** Okay, that's funny because last semester, the last event MOCA had was, like, a hair cutting event.

**ARL:** Perfect!

**Interviewers:** But it wasn't held here. It was held in Cro.

**ARL:** Ah! So is- is the Black group called MOCA now?

**Interviewers:** Yeah.

**ARL:** We were called Umoja back in the day.

**Interviewers:** Umoja is- Umoja is not a thing any more. They turned into the BSU, so Black Students Union.

**ARL:** Okay, okay. So what's MOCA?

**Interviewers:** MOCA: Men of Color Alliance?

**ARL:** Okay, okay. Good. [unclear]. I respect it. That's awesome. Yeah, that's it. Thank you Francesca.

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**Leslie Williams:** Alright, good afternoon. I'm Leslie Williams, I'm class of 1988 at Connecticut College. I'm sitting here on this lovely Reunion Saturday with two amazing students who are interviewing me and, you know, it's kind of cool. I came to Conn College in 19- the fall of 1984 from the Bronx, New York. Yeah. I was looking for a smaller, more intimate college, so this made sense. I went to a huge high school. I went to Bronx Science and then enrolled here. I studied economics and international relations.

**Interviewers:** Same.

**LW:** Same? Yeah? Oh wow? Where in the Bronx are you from?

**Interviewers:** I'm from Fordham.

**LW:** Okay, okay. Where did you high school?

**Interviewers:** I went to Urban Assembly

**LW:** Urban Assembly! Is that in Riverdale? Where is Urban Assembly?

**Interviewers:** No, it's in Bathgate.

**LW:** Bathgate, okay. Okay, okay. We have to talk some more. So, I was involved in Unity House. I was involved with Umoja, the Black student organization and I was involved- we had a supporting organization at the time called SOAR, Society Organized Against Racism in New England Higher Education, so I was involved with that.

**Interviewers:** We don't have that any more.

**LW:** And then we were all -- because we were a small community of kids of color, we all knew each other -- so we, you know- I knew the kids from La Unidad and that was around the time, I think 1986, '87, something like that, we had our first Asian Student Association, CASA, came about, you know, but we all- we all knew each other, so we all supported each other and stuff. Unity House moved up here around that time, too so it moved from Vinyl Cottage across the street to here and the ground floor, the Pepsico Room was dedicated, so that's, you know, that nice beautiful space and then they had the administrative offices and a library even on the first floor.

**Interviewers:** The library's still there.

**LW:** It's still there? Okay. And then they had five student residences up here. You know Unity House was a great place of nurturing and friendship, like, some of my oldest friends from Conn Coll and, like, because I'm old some of my oldest friends in the world, you know, are from, you know, Conn Coll, so I keep up with a number of people. And then I have a few of my classmates who are here that, you know, we were all involved in stuff at Unity House too back in the day. So, my experience at Connecticut College led me to my current career, which is working in, on higher education issues. I'm a faculty member at Teacher's College

at Columbia University, but it was like, you know, I worked here at Unity House too for a number of years, 1996 to 2004 and thinking about how colleges work, you know, how they can work better to serve all students has been one of the things that I think that, you know, has been a passion of mine, because when we were students here, we had a good time in many ways but we also understood that there were things that were missing, you know, in terms of the diversity of the student body, in terms of the diversity of the curriculum, the diversity of the faculty, and the kind of experiences you could have the kind of connections you could make, the kind of things you could learn. And so we worked to, you know, improve those conditions. I was involved with, you know, a few other folks in the 1986 May Fanning takeover. We thought that we had gotten some commitments of creating change at Connecticut College. They lasted for a little bit and then I think we kind of backslid in some ways and I think some of the things you saw resurface here this past February, some of the same kind of issues, you know, that have not been attended to, So, hopefully, we'll continue to work on these issues, try to make them better so that students like you guys and the ones who come after have even richer experiences than what we had, but I also hope you make the kinds of connections and friendships with each other too that are long-lasting because this is a kind of small, intimate place where that can really happen. Yeah. I'll stop there unless you all want to ask me some questions.

**Interviewers:** What was your most memorable event that happened at Unity?

**LW:** The most memorable event that happened at Unity House ... hmmm ... besides the party?

**Interviewers:** It could be a party! It could be a party! It could be a party!

**LW:** Wow, whenever there were big-name celebrities that came to College, you know, for Black History Month or something like that, usually a reception at Unity House afterwards, so, you know, those were, you know, sort of highlight kind of events. I remember there was an amazing vibraphonist named Roy Ayers, who was, you know, who played here and we had a reception afterwards. I got an autographed picture from him. And so, you know, it- you still hear him every now- I listen to a lot of jazz. You still hear him on jazz radio and stuff like that and I'm like, I met that dude. I guess that's probably one of the most memorable, yeah, memories. Yeah.

**Interviewers:** Thank you so much.

**LW:** Alright.

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**Glidjy Dupont:** Hi, my name is Glidjy Dupont. I'm the class of 1998. I participated in a lot of events in Unity.

**Interviewers:** [unclear]

**GD:** Yeah. I was the head of MSSC for one year. I believe it was either '96 or '97.

**Interviewers:** What was MMS ...

**GD:** MSSC is the Minority Students Steering Committee. It was the political arm of all the Unity House- Unity House clubs. So, you had Umoja -- trying it from memory -- for the Black students. Umoja meant Unity in Swahili. You had CASA for the Asian students. We had SOAR, which was kind of a mixture, including white col- you know, students, who were important supporters of minority causes. Yeah, so that was some of the groups. I'm sure I'm forgetting a couple more. La Unidad, of course, which was Hispanic.

**Interviewers:** I think we still have that.

**GD:** Yeah. La Unidad. And there might have been a couple more. Those were all the clubs within Unity House and each club had political arms or political representative that were in the committee of the Minority Students Steering Committee. And the Minority Steering Committee was to take their needs and their requests, their political requests, concerns and have direct conversation with the College governance, including at that point, it was President Claire Gaudiani. We met with her on a regular basis, I would say. And then we also met with the Board of Directors. We always had a report at their quarterly meetings to ap- you know, to let them know about our concerns and our issues, things like that.

**Interviewers:** Alright, thank you. Like, what are some issues that ... MMSE?

**GD:** MSSC, yeah, we dealt with a lot of issues. So, when I came in, I believe I came in and I was class of '98, so I would have come in '94, '95, '94, probably. We first of all- it was one of the biggest class of minority students. We felt that that was the result of a lot of our former students' fight, you know, like, the things they had fought for, our class were kind of like the realization of it. I think of the Fanning Takeover in 1986, when students took over the building Fanning when students asked for more student of colors, more professors, better programs, and to some extent, you know, that class represented, kind of like the outcome of that. But it was never sustained, right? So, some of the biggest issues we were dealing with were, you know, our professors, especially minority professors, were given enough track for tenure. They weren't given enough space, to, you know, to write, like sabbaticals and that stuff. So, even though we were trying to recruit more professors of color, we could never keep them, because compared to their white colleagues they weren't being put on a track, given the support, you know, for scholarship. So, they would make these demands that they had to have more writing, more published work, but yet with the amount of work load that they had and the lack, you know, of the time to write, not being on tenure track, you know, they left for greener pastures. So, that was one thing. We were fighting for more student of colors to continue and then, especially with La Unidad, they wanted more robust programming in terms of scholarship, in terms of Hispanic Studies. Even, you know, CASA wanted more classes and not just on the history, but, you know, in terms of philosophy, artwork, to represent those cultures, so they can actually- a lot of these kids ended up majoring in either Hispanic Studies or Asian Studies and whatnot, so they wanted a bigger and better program, quality programs. So, those were the kind of things we were fighting for during that era. Yeah.

**Interviewers:** What do you think of Unity House now?

**GD:** Well, I'm not sure. Unity House was not just- like I said, from my perspective, the political arm of minority students. It was a social gathering place. It was a safe place. We also had people that actually lived here, right? So each of the groups would nominate one member to live here. So, the great thing is you had your own bathroom. Got the kitchen downstairs, so it was kind of like a prize, right? It was, no it was a huge room compared to the ones on campus. So, it was really an important part of minority students, not just for what it represented, right, but also physically, you know. A lot of gatherings. Eclipse Weekend was huge. You know, [unclear] came out of Unity House Fall Weekend, little programs that we did then, so I'm not sure what's going to go forward with what they are thinking about doing with it, but I hope there's always a space for kids to go to and unite, and talk and gather. I'll add that socially or more, you know, from an academic perspective than from a political perspective. That's my hope.

**Interviewers:** Was MMSC -- I hope I'm saying it right -- was it still a club when you graduated?

**GD:** Yeah, it was still a club. You know, again, as long as those other clubs were there MSSC was there to help, you know, put those voices together and prioritize our issues and present them formally to the administration and the Board of Directors.

**Interviewers:** And during -- last question -- during your time here what was your most memorable Unity event or, like, Eclipse event.

**GD:** You- oh, it was definitely Eclipse Weekend. I could say if it wasn't for Eclipse Weekend, I wouldn't have been at Connecticut College.

**Interviewers:** Really?

**GD:** Because I remember- I had applied to Wesleyan and Conn College that was my, you know, Wesleyan was my top choice and I was going to go there. Practically, I had told them yes and then I came in for Eclipse Weekend and it blew me away about that. The brotherliness, you know, how welcome some of the other students made me feel- felt, the need that was here, right? We were smaller groups. We knew a lot of each other, the support for each other, and the camaraderie, the fun that we had with each other. I think that's the one reason that I actually came to Connecticut College over Wesleyan. For me personally. And I'm glad I made that decision. Yeah.

**Interviewers:** Alright. Thank you for sharing.

**GD:** Alright. Excellent.