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### Unity House Interviews 2

Ryan Rivera

Ratia Ruangsuwana Collins

Saveena Dhall

Julie Leung

Nicole McNeil Ford

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**Interviewer:** Do you have any questions for us.

**Interviewees (Ratia Ruangsuwana Collins, Saveena Dhall, Julie Leung, Nicole McNeil Ford):**

Yeah, I have, like, a few questions, so to start off, just everyone go around the table and just say your name.

**Interviewees:** Your year?

**Interviewer:** So, you guys are all the same year?

**Interviewees:** No.

**Interviewer:** '94, okay, so we'll just go around and you just say your class year. So we will start with you and then go around.

**Interviewees:** Hi, I'm Ratia Ruangsuwana Collins, class of 1993.

**Interviewees:** Hi, I'm Saveena Dhall, class of 1994.

**Interviewees:** Hi, I'm Julie Leung, class of 1993.

**Interviewees:** And, Nicole McNeil Ford, class of 1993.

**Interviewer:** Thank you. The first question will be what is your connection to Unity House.

**Interviewees:** The first organization I joined when I came to Conn College was CCASA and I met so many people through CCASA. I ran for a position with CCASA. It was, you know, pushing me out of my comfort zone, but I got elected. Yay, you know. And then I- during my time at Conn College I started doing other, or becoming involved in other leadership positions. I was involved with SGA and then my senior year I was a house fellow.

**Interviewees:** And speaking of pushing your comfort zone -- so I'm class of '94 and these guys are class of '93 -- and I remember my first CCASA meeting, like I'd come in with the intention that I would go and slowly understanding that the identity Asian-American existed. I think that in high school there were so few of us students of color, it was just, Oh, I'm a minority student. And I was so excited that there was an Asian-American group. And I remember walking in, I was, like, I'm going to run for freshman rep! They have elections! And I walked in and there was no other South Asian person in the room. And it was jarring, because I kind of thought I would see one other person. And I remember internally being, like, I can stay or I can go, and I was, like, I have to stay, because if I stay I increase the space. And it was really hard and thankfully I won and then I found all these incredible women of color. Like, I was talking about that, that was my

biggest gift that Unity gave me was all these women of color that I just saw as these role models and reflections, like the- you can be and you can have a voice. And I- these guys and others that came, in the class of '92, '91, they really were influential. It really was an awesome time to be a student at Conn.

**Interviewees:** Yeah, I was going to say, I mean, there were a lot of student activists from previous years and, you know, that was always, like Wow, these were students like us and they really had a significant role on the campus and so that was just really powerful to know that, you know, students could have a voice. They were standing up for their rights, their representation on campus and so they were real role models, you know, for me, students of color and, yeah, it was really something I took away from that experience.

**Interviewer:** Do you want to say something?

**Interviewees:** Can I add one more thing?

**Interviewer:** Yeah, of course.

**Interviewees:** So when we came here, it was this tradition of almost pulling us aside and sharing the history. So we had come after the Takeover, Fanning Takeover, and there was this whole sense- Unity had just moved from across the street to this location. So, I think it was my second or third year that Unity was here. For you guys it would be first year. And there was this whole sense of This is what we've accomplished and this means you have to do something to better it or further it. And they were name-shared: like Charlie and Masako and all these other people that had been there and had created this stuff. So there was this very cool excitement, but there was this sense that you'd better not get something wrong. You'd better get involved and do something.

**Interviewees:** And for me it was such a safe space in a sense. I mean, coming from you know, a majority community at home was predominantly white community at home and I think I came for a students of color orientation or something like that and this was such a welcoming space and just people of color here and a welcoming space and I always knew that, you know, no matter where I was on campus, whatever I majored in, whoever I interacted with, I could always come here and see people of color just, like, looking at- seeing myself reflected back in them so that it always gave me a sense of being grounded and no matter what happened, you know, outside on the campus I could always come to this building and feel that- a sense of safety or being acknowledged here.

**Interviewees:** It was my safe space.

**Interviewees:** Yeah, I had the same experience, because I didn't have that in high school, you know, and my parents and I were first generation, so, you know, they were worried about other things. Very different things than I was worried about and the neighborhood- I grew up in the Bronx. So, I think Conn College was very different for me. But to have a place like Unity House to

meet other people of color whose experiences, you know, some of the experiences, obviously, they're all different. But there's a lot of commonality. And then I was a member, you know, of Prep for Prep. Julie, you were part of ABC, right? So, you know it was nice to meet other people like that.

**Interviewees:** Yeah, and also I think something that you mentioned that struck a chord, I think all of us, we come from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, but we're all first generation. Like, our parents are coming from different countries so we could also understand the immigrant struggle of our parents coming here and being first generation, first generation going to school and, you know, kind of navigating that on our own. But, just again having some commonalities there as well.

**Interviewees:** Yeah, I mean just the speakers they brought.

**Interviewees:** Or the class above us. [unclear]

**Interviewees:** Dariell.

**Interviewees:** What's the guy's name, I forgot his name, the one that used to live in the dorm, the international dorm.

**Interviewees:** In Knowlton?

**Interviewees:** Was it Charlie?

**Interviewees:** Charlie Thu?

**Interviewees:** Yeah.

**Interviewees:** Yeah, the class above us helped a lot.

**Interviewees:** And, I mean, I think it was weird. It was like, the programming we did, it was almost like no limitation. I mean, there's a powerhouse, her name is Helen Zia. I was a first year student. I just picked up the phone because they told me I could just call her and we could invite her to speak and we just did. It's not like they said, "Oh, this is going to be really hard. I'm not sure, Saveena, if we can pull it off. You might want to see." It was, like, "You want to do this? Just go do it." So there was this, like, no-barriers attitude, just, like, the kind of energy that Unity had at that time, too. So, you just felt like, yeah, I can be whatever I want, I can do what I want.

**Interviewees:** Empowered.

**Interviewees:** Yeah, totally empowered.

**Interviewees:** And also the financial support, right? Because we had to ask for, as members of the clubs, we had to ask for the budget every year and it was cool that we were able to spend thousands of dollars as honorarium for speakers. And it's just like, wow, I have this money and we can, like, do as you said. We can call whoever we want and have a speaker here. It was very- it was very empowering to be able to do that.

**Interviewer:** So, I have a clarifying question. So, what is CCASA, because that's not around.

**Interviewees:** Connecticut College Asian/Asian-American Students Association. Because we laughed about it. We were like, "I think it's a Latino group, because it's called CCASA."

**Interviewees:** That's what I thought at first, yeah.

**Interviewees:** Right, right. It's a mouthful.

**Interviewees:** And then there was La Unidad which was for the Latino and Hispanic students and then they had Umoja was for African-American or students of African descent and CCASA.

**Interviewees:** And SOAR.

**Interviewees:** SOAR, Students Organized Against Racism.

**Interviewees:** And then there was a multi-racial group that started, like maybe your junior year, you know, my sophomore year. But that was only five groups, I think.

**Interviewees:** It was very small. I'm glad they have a lot more now.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, they have a lot more now.

**Interviewees:** Which is fantastic, you know?

**Interviewer:** So, my next question would be, like, when you first got to Conn, like, how was, like, the shock of, like, you know because you're going from one environment to another so how was that culture shock?

**Interviewees:** Really shocked. I had three roommates, right? All three were white. All three came from very wealthy families. You know, I'm originally from New York City and I came here on a full scholarship, so it was very shocking. And I wish- I'm glad Conn now has, like, got support for students who they, I don't know, bring here. It was hard for me. And luckily I met these guys. She was the first one I met, so ...

**Interviewees:** Well, we met through Freshman Focus and we were in KB together, right?

**Interviewees:** Yeah. And then which was- you probably have some similar things now, but it was- I thought it was a great program, but it was shocking ...

**Interviewees:** It was a learning program.

**Interviewees:** Yeah, it was shocking to start at Conn just because it- I went to a private school that was predominantly Jewish, very, very- most of the kids were very economically well off and I was a scholarship kid there. I was a scholarship kid here, so in terms of financial, you know, my financial background stayed the same, but I thought that a lot of kids at Conn were very privileged as well, right? So, yeah, well my roommate was also well off. So, it was kind of interesting and it was, you know, I wish there had been more support, you know. Maybe if I had, I don't know, a faculty advisor or, like- because, you know, when you first start you don't know what your major is, so it's not like you can go to your major advisor and say, What do you think about this? I wish I had someone who was, you know, a faculty member or someone who was- who could look back in hindsight and say, "Hey, you might want to do X, Y, and Z." But I, you know, was fortunate in that I found a lot of people, you know, these guys and people through Unity House that were, you know, that were support for me. And I think it would be nice if you had that kind of support when you start and guiding you. You know, because I think there were times throughout the years, even as a senior -- you know I was a house fellow -- it would have been nice to have, I don't know, like a faculty member or a staff member who you could go to and say, You know what, I am involved in this situation, I'm not quite sure how to handle it, you know. And I don't know- you know, I mean I- I have a wide network of friends who are able to help and, you know, I know there are resources there, but I think what would have been helpful for me is if somebody, let's say, from Unity House or a faculty member, someone who's a person of color could be even matched up or available as a resource and say, "Hey, I'm here if you have weird questions" or, you know, you're like- something like that. I think that would have been nice.

**Interviewees:** Or even before kids start school, right? Because, I just- all I remember my first sense was with my three roommates, they had gotten together before hand and- and had kind of discussed their decorations or whatever they were going to do. So now I'm a mom, right? I know, like what it is to kind of bring my daughter to school. She has, like, you know, her whole life getting together with her roommate and all. Well, they did it without me and when I came, when I got to the room, I was the last one there and they had already taken all the closets. They had given me this little, little broom closet and then were very surprised that I spoke English, because they were, like, "Well, you had, like, all these names," because you know I had my English name, my Chinese name. And they were, like, "We didn't know what to call you." And I'm, like, Julie was right there. You can't pronounce Julie? So I wish, you know, and hopefully, kids nowadays even before they reach school, they have that support. Like, I think that's very important too, because not- you know, from my experience I knew with my daughter, okay you need to contact your roommate and talk about ...

**Interviewees:** I didn't know that.

**Interviewees:** Yeah, our parents were ... but I didn't know that.

**Interviewees:** You're first generation, you don't know that.

**Interviewees:** Right, so that's very- it was hard. And it's- the fact that it's etched in my memory, it affected me a lot, right? So, you know- and it was- I think it wasn't until I got to know the folks here in Unity that it helped. That was- like I said, it was my safe place.

**Interviewees:** I mean, I think Unity, like the first week ...

**Interviewees:** They reached out.

**Interviewees:** Yeah. They did like a students of color welcome reception and that was how I found out that Unity existed. And if I hadn't, I'm sure you would have told me. You were like my sophomore advisor. But, yeah, those things are important. I think back then they thought about diversity, and they didn't think about belonging or inclusion. Right? The pre-onboarding piece is so important, because it calms your parents. Like, things like my mom knowing that Unity House existed ... Like, your mom ... It was like, phew. It felt you could breathe. Like, there will be someone there to take care of my kid because I don't quite know the language or how to advise her. Yeah, she needs advice and she needs anchoring. You know, that kind of thing.

**Interviewer:** So, you mentioned the word belonging. Did you guys feel like you belonged on campus? Like, even though they were trying to do diversity programs, did you feel like you belonged in these spaces per se?

**Interviewees:** I'll jump in, because ... um, no. I will say it that way, no. I didn't feel like I necessarily belonged, but I don't know if there- if I felt that there was any type of exclusion. I don't think anybody did any behavior that made me feel excluded, per se. So, I grew up in a predominantly white community and the way I was treated was you're tolerated, but you just don't exist, right? So, you're a- you can- on this campus, yeah, you can go to the classes, but we don't have to really acknowledge you, right? So- but I think during that time, like we were saying before, it was still an exciting time because there was a lot. There was- it felt like the administration was trying to be more inclusive. I think that was the turning point where they had Unity House. We had different programs. There were- was a lot of social reckoning going on in the country so you had to address it. That was, I think, 1992 was when the Rodney King beating was recorded, so people came together, say people of color and the white students and the white faculty, people were shocked. Right, we marched. So, I think that kind of triggered the campus at large to be more aware of the plight of people of color. So, I think, yes, I think there was- not necessarily being excluded but more tolerated, but I think there was a sense of trying to change that that- narrative. That's how I felt.

**Interviewees:** We didn't have the word belonging. That to me is more the feeling we had, but it wasn't quite vocalized and it wasn't acknowledged. It was part of the national conversation, right? So, I wouldn't say that in my brain I even expected belonging. So, that expectation wasn't

there because I hadn't- I had gone to a similar school but on a smaller scale. I went to an independent boarding school. So, I almost had four years of a little college before coming to the big college. I didn't have different expectations in that way. I kind of knew that the economic piece and the first gen piece would be a big barrier, more so than other things. And I didn't expect to have Unity House and that was, like, awesome. But I think in certain spaces of campus, I felt belonging, right, which was places like Unity and the safety and almost bravery. Not just safety, but bravery, which I think Unity facilitated. But I didn't have that expectation in other space, you know where I'd feel that others only see a South Asian brown kid and that's it and whatever stereotype I fit at that moment is how they're going to put me in that stereotype. And like, just even us doing SGA, like, I was the first student of color president of SGA. Didn't even know that, like, What, we hadn't had one before that?

**Interviewer:** I'm so proud of you two, so proud of you two. Yeah. Yeah.

**Interviewees:** Why is that so weird? You know what I mean? Should have happened a long time ago.

**Interviewees:** Yeah, but it- but it- you're right.

**Interviewees:** But that- that was so awesome to see. I remember, you know, campaigning and Saveena as SGA president. I was chair of Academic Affairs and it was cool because, at that time multiculturalism was, you know, the term that we used and it was trying to see how more multiculturalism could be incorporated in the curriculum. Kind of interesting to see, you know, the path that higher education has come, right? And where- where it is now in different states around our country, so, it's- it's interesting.

**Interviewer:** Okay, so last few questions before I stop the recording, but thank you for, like, the insight, I didn't even know that you were the first woman of color president of SGA, that's really cool. So, can we just go around, what's your major and then where did you come from state-wise? Does that make- yeah.

**Interviewees:** Do you want my- I can do my heritage as well.

**Interviewees:** That can work too, we can do heritage as well.

**Interviewees:** Okay, okay, so I consider myself from Bronx, New York. Right, right. And, let's see, in terms of ethnic background, I'm Thai, Laotian, and Chinese. And what was your other question? Sorry. Oh, my major, sorry. So, I double majored in Government and English lit.

**Interviewees:** So, Saveena Dahll. I was born in India, but grew up in Brooklyn, New York. My major was Asian Studies, which back then was interdisciplinary major, which was helpful because I didn't have to pick one, but like most Asian people, I was pre-med as well.



**Interviewees:** I'm Julie Leung and I was born in Hong Kong, but I grew up in New York City and I majored in International Relations and minored in Chinese, because, although I'm Chinese, I didn't know Chinese.

**Interviewees:** And my name is Nicole McNeil Ford and I was born in Boston, Massachusetts to a Jamaican immigrant family, so I consider myself Jamaican-American because, culturally, that's how we were raised and my major was pre-med, Biology, or Zoology, actually was my formal major, and my minor was Hispanic Studies.

**Interviewer:** That's kind of cool because I'm also from New York City, I'm from Brooklyn.

**Interviewees:** Where in Brooklyn?

**Interviewer:** I'm from Fort Greene. Where are you from?

**Interviewees:** Starrett City, I don't know if you know, it's, in, like, East New York.

**Interviewer:** Oh, yeah.