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Ryan Rivera '25 - Carlos Garcia '88

Ryan Rivera

Carlos Garcia

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Ryan Rivera: Yeah, we have some questions so ... so, basically what I'm going to talk- ask questions about is just like your experience at Conn and you can give, like the honest truth. You don't have to, like filter or anything. Just keep it honest. I'll just- to start off, can you say your name again and your class year.

CG: Carlos Garcia, class of 1988.

RR: So, my first question to you is what is your connection to Unity House?

CG: So, in the late '80s, Unity House was across Route 32 in a small, probably, like, twenties, cedar-shingled type house- house, looked like a house. Doesn't look as big as the current 2023 Unity House, but it was a house. It felt homey and inviting and Griselle Hodge was the director of Unity House and she felt like something a- between a big sister and an aunty, just a little bit older than we were. She was, you know, a youthful mom at the time. And I was there every day or felt like every day. I had a campus job there where I was like a receptionist and I remember that Griselle used to keep the soap operas on tv, which was fun. So, I had not been a soap opera watcher, but that was something to look forward to, you know, what the characters were up to the next day. And we would, you know, eat there, we would meet there. Umoja and La Unidad were housed there. SOAR, Students Organized Against Racism, also would convene there, or at least meet us there. They might have had their own meeting place as well. And I hear that Students Organized Against Racism is not around today, but that there is a- an equity group, a group that is interested- an across-campus group that is concerned with social equity that maybe plays a similar role, whereas La Unidad and Umoja had, you know, a race or an ethnicity in mind, Students Organized Against Racism was multicolor, you know, multi-ethnic, across, you know, the campus-type organization that provided a place for a lot of white students to get involved and to -- I don't think we used the world ally back then, but, you know the concept was the concept -- to be active allies. And I was class of '88, however my sophomore year in 1986 there was a group of student leaders, including people at the very top, a woman named Sheila, a man named Richard Greenwald at the top of Students Organized Against Racism, and of course my boys, Eddy Castell who ran- who was the president of La Unidad and Frankie T., Frank Tuitt, who was the president of Umoja. The four of them and perhaps some others -- I don't want to rob others of credit, you know, I don't know exactly who was in the kitchen cooking it up -- but that group of them and perhaps others spearheaded -- you know, if they didn't come up with the idea and the architecture for the- the- the 1986 Fanning Takeover. You know, I'm proud to say I was in there. I was in the building. I remember we used chains to lock them out, but I was no architect of it. I was a follower, not a leader and I was very, very much awestruck by these leaders, you know, Sheila, Richard, Frankie, and Eddy. And I remember vividly Oakes Ames, the president, looking up at us at the second story window, trying to get into his office, you know, sort of shaking his fist at us, "You kids, let me- this is my- I need to get in here," and one of the things about the takeover in '86 -- I don't know if this differentiates itself from the other takeovers -- at the time, like, if you wanted to attack the corpus of the campus, this was

the way to do that, because the president's office -- let's call that the brain -- was in there. The bursar's office, where you transacted, no one could get paid on an invoice at Connecticut College or make a payment to Connecticut College, because the bursar's office was locked in there and Oakes Ames office and -- what was the third function -- oh, the switchboard. Back then -- imagine like you see in an old movie, the switchboard and you tried to call and they'd connect you -- the switchboard was locked down. So you couldn't talk to Conn, you couldn't transact with Conn, and Conn couldn't think properly, because they were locked out. So, in one fell swoop, you know, you really had them- you know, you had their attention. And, yeah, so Oakes Ames was there and I have nothing explicit against the man, he was a good man, but, you know, he just wasn't getting things done at the pace we wanted, we were agitating for more, faster, sooner, better. I guess he might have had the option to take legal action or use, you know, police force -- I want to say there were police, or, you know, their presence was on the street, but not actually physically forcing us out; it was a negotiation instead. And, you know, pretty amazing to be physically looking down at this man, sort of helplessly asking us for a break, "Hey, man, let me in." No, we're not doing that. I don't -- other people I'm sure know, I'm sure it's written down somewhere -- how long we were in there ...

RR: It wasn't, like, three days?

CG: Was it that long?

RR: Because wasn't the- it might, that year- it was the longest takeover at the time and then it was recently beaten this year -- we had our own Fanning Takeover -- which was, like, two weeks, almost.

CG: Oh, my goodness.

RR: Yeah.

CG: So, it's funny, I have no memory of the logistics. I mean, obviously, we had bathrooms, but how did we eat? Did we bring our bio books and, you know, our math books, our history books with us? Were we doing homework? I don't even- I don't remember all that. I remember being awestruck by the leaders, the fact that we had shut them down and then the fact that Oakes Ames, this powerful man, looked relatively powerless. You know those are the highlights for me. But, I'll just say one more time, I looked up to those people so much that years later, when I needed another obligation like I needed a hole in the head, Eddy Castell calls me and says, "We need you on the Board of Directors," and it was like- I ended up serving eight years on the Board of Directors and the reason is because Eddie told me to, you know. Years later as a full-grown man I was still looking up to Eddie and I was going to do what he said needed to be done. Yeah.

RR: I know you say you don't remember all the logistics, but do you, like, know what caused, like, why did you guys do the takeover? Like, what was the one event that, like, Okay, we have to do this now.

CG: Well, it's funny, someone just recent corrected my recollection. I had recalled that one of the things was to accelerate the divestiture from investments in companies that supported the South African apartheid regime, which was a thing on college campuses at the time and it was a thing here, but apparently that wasn't, I think I've been told, one of our official demands. The demands related more so to accelerating the increase in the number of students of color, Black and Brown students and diversity, the way we understood it then, I don't think as fully, frankly, as we understand it now. I think the idea- notions of diversity are more often by more people more complete and thorough, but as we were, you know, understanding it then and faculty as well. So, we wanted more- fundamentally more Black and Brown people in classrooms and teaching.

RR: So, another question is -- this is more general -- what's your major?

CG: My major was government. I guess some people call it political science, government. I was a government major. I was a house fellow. I was in the CoCoBeaux, the club baseball team, I was an editor in the newspaper. I was a very, very engaged student here on campus and at the same time I was very -- what's the word? -- impressionable. You know, great leaders could make a strong impression on a young guy like me back then and they really did. I- I really looked up to those folks: Sheila and Richard and Frankie, Frankie Tuitt, and Eddy Castell.

RR: So, wait, for house fellow, what building were you in?

CG: I was the Hamilton house fellow my senior year.

RR: Oh, nice. Alright, so then ...

CG: But probably my greatest distinction -- I don't know if anyone else has ever achieved this at Connecticut College -- is I lived all four years in the Plex. Which I don't know is a great honor because I might have liked to have seen South Campus, but for some reason they always stuck me in those modern buildings.

RR: I mean, there's people who lived in the Plex for four years and they loved it,

CG: Oh, is that right? Oh, see, I thought I was- I was a unicorn. I didn't know that, yeah. But back then people were like What?

RR: Yeah, people are like that still, but oh' my gosh they're in the Plex, but they're happy to live in the Plex, some people, so ...

CG: Look, I mean I didn't know any different. I thought it was just fine.

RR: So are you first generation or ...

CG: So, I'm half Cuban and half Korean. I end up looking Filipino, but I'm Cuban and Korean and on the- you could say. You could say I'm first generation, except just a little complicated. Cuban side, absolutely I'm first-generation born here and on the Korean side as well, but on the Korean side, my Korean mother was educated in American schools overseas. So she was Americanized by her education, but she wasn't American per se, or born in America.

RR: Got it, so how is it- like I guess you're technically first generation in the sense that you- you got your education, like, not overseas? So, how's that?

CG: Can you rephrase it?

RR: Oh, like, I would say that technically you would be first gen in the sense of like you've graduated from an American- you didn't go overseas for your education, so how do you feel about that or do you have any feelings about that or ...

CG: Well, I- it's almost like it's not fair for me to appropriate too much from that experience because it didn't feel heavily that way to me. Put it this way, raised by single mom, so my Cuban side had a limited impact on my development. Up to age seven, I was in an all-Cuban neighborhood, but my mother, who was Korean, grew up in American schools loving Elvis Presley. You know what I mean? So she seems very American from the start when you meet her, so we're a bit of a hybrid. So- and then I grew up in New York City, which is so diverse, so I don't have a lot of those feelings from my own personal experience, you know, of feeling maybe like an outsider with regard to nationality. Race, of course, but not- I don't have that same immigrant story to tell. It's sort of just different, it's, you know, it's a one-off.

RR: And then, my last question, because I don't want to keep you here too long, but at Conn did you- did you have a space where you felt, like, you know, you belonged here? You know, like a PWI, like, you know a disconnect.

CG: Yeah, well, I don't know if you used that word belonging intentionally, you know, in the DEI space that's a very powerful word. It's one thing to be inclusive and it's yet a step deeper to establish a sense of belonging in an institutional space, where, you know, we don't just include, but that those who are included feel like they belong. It's a very powerful word. I would say that I did and I didn't. I had a couple of experiences where I thought, Oh, wow, they don't think I belong, you know? But I will also say that the majority of the time the sentiment I carried was I belong until once in a while I'd say, Oh, they don't think so. A certain person, a certain circumstance would reveal that, you know, there wasn't a full consensus on whether I belonged. You know what I mean? But, generally, I think, you know, I had the view that I did. I think Unity helped a lot. Griselle Hodge, talk about people I looked up to. I love Griselle like an aunty, I just saw her this weekend at Reunion. I love her. L-O-V-E. She was a rock for us. So, she increased that sense of belonging, but the numbers weren't great. There weren't a lot of Black and Brown people, you know? You know, occasionally across the Green you'd spot one and you'd be, like, you radar was up, "Hey, what's up? Wait, I see you too!" because it's not like we were everywhere. So, yeah, that would be my answer. I mean, I think the numbers were not good,

but the intention and the culture did make me feel like I belonged. It's just that there were some bad apples, specific individual humans which would say and do certain things, some of which were atrocious and then you'd be like, Okay, they don't think I belong, you know? But the overall sense, I would say the overriding sense was yes.