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### Ryan Rivera '25 - Griselle Benitez-Hodge '86

Ryan Rivera

Griselle Benitez-Hodge

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**Ryan Rivera:** Hello, my name is Ryan Rivera and I'm the class of 2025 and today is June first and I'll be interviewing ... And you need to say your name.

**Griselle Benitez Hodge:** Griselle Benitez Hodge, class of '86.

**RR:** Nice. So my first question for you is, why did you decide to come to Conn?

**GBH:** So, I had a different track coming to Connecticut College. I came in as a secretary, employed at the secretarials. I lived in New London. I was a resident of New London and got a job as a secretary in the office of community affairs in 1975 and I became- I started taking classes as an employee after working here for a couple of years. It took me eight years to get my degree in 1986. In the meantime, I moved from the office of community affairs -- it was merged with the Unity House program -- and I became the administrative assistant at Unity House in 1980 and then in 1987, I became the director. In 1993 I was an interim dean of freshman and at the end of '93 I left Connecticut College after eighteen years.

**RR:** Wow. So, you have a very interesting story, so you were working for the College but also taking classes, so how was that, like, mix of both, like, the work, your working, the administrative part and the student part?

**GBH:** So, at the time I understood that- understood that you didn't have staff- folks taking classes. You could not take classes during the day. You were allowed to take one class a semester, but you had to do it in the evening unless your immediate supervisor agreed and approved for you to be taking that course during the day, so I did a combination because the nature of my job -- I was the secretary and then administrative assistant -- I really had to be present in the office all the time, so it was difficult for me to be away, but I did take some- one class sometimes during the semester, during the day but for the most part I did evenings. And then in the summer, for a few years I did not work in the summer. I was a nine-month appointment employee, so I was able to take full classes in the summer, like two the first session and two the second session.

**RR:** What did you study in?

**GBH:** So, my major was a double major. I did Hispanic Studies and Sociology and I also started with a teaching certification in Education and I started doing my student teaching, but I really found out that I did not enjoy being in a classroom and I did pursue further my teaching certification at the time. So, I ended up with a Hispanic Studies and Sociology double major.

**RR:** Nice. And then, during your time here, like, did anything surprise you about the College during your time here or ...

**GBH:** Well, you know, I was here for 18 years so I lived through a lot of different changes on campus, not just through the Unity House program and the multicultural climates and the climate for students of color, but I did a lot of advocacy work around- around students, around issues that were related to students of color and racism and minorities and multicultural. My work on the campus for the most part was mostly advocating for those issues but I did it across the board. I did it in connection with other programs, with other people on the campus. It wasn't isolated to Unity House. So, I did that for at least fifteen years of my time here.

**RR:** So, one question I have is that over your time at Conn, like, how did you see, like, diversity change on campus, because, you know, back then it was predominantly white, so have you seen- how has that changed in present from your time there.

**GBH:** You know, I find one of the mis- misinformation that people have about the numbers on campus and diversity, traditionally for Conn College, the percentages and the numbers are still the same when you're talking fifty years ago. There were spurts of time where probably mostly Black students and Latino students, those numbers- those numbers, you know, rose depending on what was the social climate in the world and the United States and then it would go back down again, but if you look traditionally it's always been ten percent, ten percent. It really hasn't- it's still the same today, so advocating for all those issues, maybe what we have done is to maintain what we always have done, but in terms of the spike, there may be some decades that maybe there was a little spike and then it went down again, but it's- it's still the same thing, it's still the numbers and you look at percentages, it hasn't changed much.

**RR:** And can you talk, like, about how Unity House impacted the students of color at Conn?

**GBH:** Well, you know, the Unity House if you hear- if you listen to what the students of color said, first of all, Unity House was a haven away from home. So, the location across the street really, really served that and I heard an alum from the 70s who was one of the founders of the -- Unity House initially was run by students and it was a place where all of the Black students' organizations, it was the birth of them, also the Latino students, it was where it all started -- so, this was run by students. It was the place where they gathered with their clubs. it was the place where they hung out. But then there came a time that Unity became more political on campus, became more advocacy for all kinds of issues and it evolved what it is today which, you know, it is much more multicultural. It's much more expanded. I don't like to say that Unity is more inclusive, because Unity never closed the doors to anybody. I think people just, and groups, just became- found Unity as a place where they felt comfortable and wanted to be part of the- of whatever Unity meant on the campus and found that they also wanted to be part of that.

**RR:** So, when you started, it was across the street. Were you there when they moved or ...

**GBH:** Actually, that was my first task as director, was to move Unity House on the campus, to identify a facility and so we had committees made up of students and administrators and faculty that were looking at different places. They were looking at the issues. I mean, they were looking at location, they were talking about the significance of locations when it comes to these issues.

There were a lot of things that were taken into consideration, it wasn't just the building -- is it a nice building? -- it was more like, what is the message for the community? What message do we want to portray? What's best for the students. You know, how do we best utilize the facility and where should it be. There was a lot of thinking that went on, thinking about relocating Unity House and that was the former president's house that we came up with. And there was major renovations that were done to it at the time and I was director when we did the physical move from across the street to the campus.

**RR:** So, you saw when they moved everything?

**GBH:** Oh yeah, I was the director and I led the parade across the street with chairs and tables and all of that. We had a real physical open- open visual event where we actually did the move and we moved, you know, walked across the highway and into the campus, walked up the hill and so we had lots of ceremonial stuff to commemorate the move. And I was the director of Unity House, so I had to lead all of that.

**RR:** Nice, and my- do you know what happened to the house after the move?

**GBH:** Which house?

**RR:** Like, after you guys moved to the new Unity House.

**GBH:** They renovated- they renovated Vinal Cottage -- that's the original name of that building -- they renovated that and made it a career services office. I don't know what it is now.

**RR:** I think that building's no longer used. Because it's the one across from the Gate House, right? Yeah, because I think there's no use for it, yeah. I feel, like, because career got moved to Fanning, so it's like the Hale Center's on the first floor and I look up that house, like, and there should be something there, like, you know, make it a dorm. I know we're having housing issues. I don't know.

**GBH:** There were always issues with crossing the street. But then there was the house next door, that it was called the Abbey House.

**RR:** Abbey House is still there.

**GBH:** And do students live in it?

**RR:** Yes, students live there.

**GBH:** Oh, okay, so they can make Vinal Cottage ...

**RR:** They can revive it and make it a new Unity House ...

**GBH:** Especially now, I understand -- we may be getting off the subject -- I understand that there's no longer a housing component to the Unity program and we had housing component, which, you know, was very beneficial to students and if you talk to students who have lived ... I mean, we had interviews and you had to apply and write an essay ...

**RR:** I spoke to Dawn ...

**GBH:** Oh, yeah, Dawn Lee, yeah.

**RR:** She was talking about it, yeah.

**GBH:** and that was and a lot of them say, "I survived Connecticut College because I got to live in Unity House," and they took that away, but, you know, that's change.

**RR:** So when, after the move, was there, like, housing ...

**GBH:** Yeah, we still- we still had- we still had housing there. That was taken away a few years after I left. No, no, there was dorms- there were bedrooms upstairs on the second floor of the new facility and we continued the housing program in that facility because we- we- we built it and we developed it with that in mind. The housing component was very important to maintain as part of the program. Oh yeah, that was all taken away, like, in 2002, somewhere around there, because I was a trustee from 2002 to 2004 and while I was a trustee that was done and then when I found out I got very upset that they had- they had canceled out the student housing component of Unity House without, you know, letting people know and all of that so it was- it was unpleasant.

**RR:** Wow, I mean it feels like we should do a revival of that because ...

**GBH:** It sure was. It's up to you guys. It's up to you guys to push for it. The rooms are there.

**RR:** Yes, for sure. And then I guess, what was the campus climate like when you were at Conn?

**GBH:** You know, it- actually climate is- it's always terrible at home. You know, racism is always present, you know. Discrimination is always present. Struggles to bring representation on the campus is always present. It was no different. The only thing that during my time the Society Organized Against Racism -- I don't know if they're still active on campus -- they got formed and they were- they were about - membership of about 80 to 90 students and it was a multicultural coalition of Caucasian Students, Asians, Blacks, Latino. I mean, you name it, this coalition of students became very strong- powerful group on the campus and the multicultural groups welcomed, welcomed that addition, welcomed that group called Society Organized Against Racism in New England higher education, so there were a number of New England campuses that were part of this coalition. We paid a membership and they were growing all over the campuses in New England and we were hosting them. We hosted, like, the second student conference here and we had about 300 students who came on campus as part of the SOAR,

what we called it at the time. And there was a lot of activism going on at that level at that level. And we had some very- and we brought Farrakhan on campus, we brought Dr. Charles King, which was a very strong racism awareness kind of presenter, very aggressive. I got a little bit into trouble being president, got a little bit into trouble being director to bring Farrakhan on campus. We brought Jane- Jane, I forgot her name now, but she does the blue eye/green eye test with racism, so a white woman who went around the country doing these racism awareness workshops. She was famous at the time we brought her. So, we brought a lot of very impactful kind of speakers on the campus at the time with SOAR and the other organizations and the students were very active. They formed a coalition that became politically involved that involved all the groups, the Unity groups had a representation and they met with the president regularly. They met with the Board of Trustees, they monitored the 1986 demands on the takeover ...

**RR:** The Fanning Takeover.

**GBH:** and they were very politically involved advocating, exhausting for the students.

**RR:** Do you know what the name of the coalition was?

**GBH:** It was called Minority ... you know its name escapes me. I see all the leaders, but- I see all the leaders, and I can't think of it right now. Minority Students Steering Committee. Minority Students Steering Committee, so because it was a political involved student group and their focus was to politically monitor what was happening on the campus, so they met with admissions, they monitored numbers in admissions, they met with the president and they reported to the president about different things. They were doing research, data research on the campus, presenting to the president. They monitored all of the demands, so how many faculty have been hired, all of the demands that they had, you know, moving Unity to the campus, you know, where we would- so they monitored all of that, so they were a politically advocacy group. And they were very strongly led by some wonderful leaders.

**RR:** That's- that's really amazing. And then you mentioned the Fanning Takeover. Do you want to talk about, like, how- your takeaways from that?

**GBH:** Well, Fanning Takeover was in 1986, that was the year I graduated, 1986, and then I became director the following year, but I had been with Unity House since 1980, so I had a lot of relationships with students, you know, cross years, a number of them had graduated and new ones had come in. And there were students who were very involved with the Unity clubs, and not just students of color. It was the students, SOAR, Asian Students, Latinos, Blacks, that were mainly involved with the- with the takeover, initiated by the presidents of the Society Organized Against Racism, was a Caucasian man, the president of Umoja, was a black African-American man, the president of the Latino group, president of the Asian group, so it was a multicultural coalition that led the organizing of the 1986 takeover. As a staff person, you know, I had limitations about how much, but my- I felt my job was to support the students at the risk of my job and I like to think that I did do, you know, my job doing that. And, you know, those leaders,

you know, they're like my sons, actually they're my son's age, all of them, and they see me as their mother, a mother or whatever. And I told them today at the panel that my role was to sneak food in to them. I'd go outside, I'd be there during the day when the media was around and all of that, but at night I had a role with another person and we made sure that they made sure they were getting food at night.

**RR:** Do you know Carlos, one of the people that was in the Fanning Takeover?

**GBH:** Carlos Garcia?

**RR:** Yes. I spoke to him last year about Fanning ...

**GBH:** Carlos Garcia, that's my kid.

**RR:** Do you- do you still keep in contact with the students today?

**GBH:** I keep in touch, not the students of today, alums. I know all of them. I go back to 1975 with them. There's a lot of them here and, you know, now with Facebook, absolutely. And I've been in their weddings and I've been, you know, to their- they're in touch with me and they come and visit and stay with me. I have the best relationship with students that I had when I was here, lots of them.

**RR:** And then what was the best part of working with the students?

**GBH:** I mean, I think the best part is the relationships that I build with them. I think how they make my time worthwhile being here, while I was working. It wasn't a job; it was my life. I mean, I lived the College. They were my babysitters, they were my social life, they were my education. College was my whole life for even the students, except for my kids. And I brought the students home and my husband today -- my husband and I have been married for 56 years - - they know my husband too and during break there were students who couldn't afford to go home, Latino students, and I would- we would bring them home with us for the spring vacations. I would always cook their meals and bring them to Unity House, cook at Unity House, and so, no, it was the 18 years best of my life.

**RR:** And then, just to end off, could you talk about what you did today at the presentation a little bit?

**GBH:** So today we had a panel of Unity directors. Unfortunately, one got sick the one that was there from '80 to '83 I think. She was- she got ill and she has a lot of great information to share, but she was ill. So, we all talked about our own time period that we served as director, what-what it has impacted our lives, the experience of being a director at Unity House and what it was like when we were in that role.

**RR:** And then, did you work with the other directors during, like, the time ...

**GBH:** Oh, yeah, because I went through two of those directors were my supervisors before I became director, so they became best of friends with me. One passed away. And then my- the Dean of the College at the time, Dr. Hampton, who was also my advisor and my mentor. He was my boss when I became director. He passed away and Carolyn, Carolyn Buxton, who did a one-year there, we all very much ... Now, I lost track. Two of the directors after me were former students of Unity House of mine, so they kind of grew through with the program of student leaders of- with friends, they're like my son and daughter. And then after that I lost track of who- who all the other directors- after 2003, I kind of lost- 2002, I lost track of the directors.

**RR:** And then I guess, to end things off, in thinking about the College today is there something from your experience that you wish students today could have?

**GBH:** I think they should bring back the feeling that Unity is a place away from home. You know, this whole thing- there shouldn't be a business plan for the university. It should be a student center, a place that students come free of having to be worried about the political aspect and doing the work for the campus that should be done by the administration. It should be a place where they can come and enjoy as a student center and not a political advocacy place.

**RR:** Is there anything else you would like to say or ...

**GBH:** No, I just want to say that the message today is that we hope that Unity always- Unity always is present on this campus, there doesn't come a time where they don't feel that they need it or that they replace it. They change directors' titles, they can change, you know, multiculturalism, DEI, whatever term they want to use, but we all hope that Unity House will always remain as identity on this campus and not be let go.