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Charles Stackhouse '94-Sharon Greene Cole '74

Charles Stackhouse

Sharon Greene Cole

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Charles Stackhouse: This is Charles Stackhouse, class of 1994. Alright, and I'm here with?

Sharon Cole: Sharon Greene Cole, class of 1974.

CS: Very good. Is this your- the first, how many reunions have you been to?

SC: I came to one day of one reunion, probably my 25th, but I actually don't remember which one it was.

CS: That's it, really?

SC: Yes.

CS: Very good. I actually have been making an effort to come every five years.

SC: I think I've been to every one since I graduated, but I could be wrong about that.

CS: So what made you come this year?

SC: It's the 50th. I mean, usually that's pretty important.

CS: I guess you can't ignore that one, right?

SC: Yes.

CS: Why did you, what made you come to Conn to begin with?

SC: I drove by the campus with my parents, either in the spring of my junior year of high school or early in the fall of my senior year, and I just fell in love with the campus. And of course I was going through multiple college catalogs, thinking about schools, and I read about Conn in the catalog, and there were lots of really appealing things and courses I wanted to take and so I applied here.

CS: Back when we could review catalogs to look at Conn.

SC: Yes, back when the guidance office had a wall of books in it that were college catalogs, and they had lists of all the courses and descriptions of all the courses. It was really complicated, you know, figuring out everything about every school.

CS: Sure. Where did you grow up?

SC: I grew up in Columbia, Connecticut, which is about 30 miles north, northwest of here.

CS: I think I know it, yeah.

SC: Yes, it's famous for its lake, and it's near UConn and near Willimantic.

CS: So, when you were looking at and considering schools, obviously I think you indicated some of the things that were most important to you. Were you looking at similar types of colleges and programs?

SC: Yes, I know that one I also considered was Wells College, which is in Aurora, New York and actually my child went there.

CS: Is that right?

SC: And I also looked at Smith, but I didn't apply there or to Wells. I only applied to Connecticut College, UConn, and Princeton because they were just going co-ed, and it sounded interesting.

CS: Oh, you know what? I did not know that around that time. That's interesting.

SC: A lot of schools went co-ed in the mid-70s.

CS: So do you remember well how the description of Conn College read in some of these books?

SC: No.

CS: I mean, it was still relatively new as a co-ed school as well, right?

SC: Well, there was actually not much about the co-ed stuff in the catalog that my school had, maybe it was a year old or something. Because remember, we were the first class that had men

who actually applied as freshmen to be here. There were other men here that had transferred, but for starting here on purpose.

CS: What were- I mean, you mentioned, I think, some of the programs and courses. What- what were sort of the highlights there for a high school senior?

SC: I actually don't remember. It was a long time ago, but I was interested in English, and I was interested in art, and then I majored in zoology.

CS: Of course, naturally.

SC: So- but like I said, a lot was the campus just is so beautiful. I fell in love with it.

CS: Had you not grown up in Connecticut? I mean, a different part of Connecticut. I grew up in Southern Connecticut, so I can appreciate how Connecticut's not Texas, you know, or California. But it's not a small state. It's not Rhode Island. It's unusual to not go everywhere within the state that you grew up in. So, there are parts of Connecticut that I don't know very well. Columbia, I had heard of, but I don't think I've ever actually been there. Was this not a campus or a part of Connecticut you had spent any time passing through?

SC: Well, we didn't come to New London very much. It's not that I had never been to New London before, but, of course, I wasn't thinking about colleges necessarily other times when I came when I was younger. We tended to- we went on Sunday drives because people did in those days, gas prices were low, and we tended to explore more of the northeast corner of the state and into Rhode Island and sometimes when we were really lucky, we would go to Riverside Park in Agawam, which is now Six Flags over New England.

CS: Ah, very good.

SC: But I was the first girl in the family to go to college.

CS: Is that right?

SC: My father dropped out of school when he turned 16 just a few months before he would have graduated from eighth grade.

CS: Wow.

SC: My mother did finish high school, but, you know, never considered anything except going in the workforce. So, it was a big deal and a couple of my high school teachers sat my mother down and talked to her and convinced her that I should go to college. And then when I got into Connecticut College, I got the letter, I was so excited. It was like, I went up, then I saw the financial aid offer, and it was nothing and I went, oomph.

CS: Is that right?

SC: Yeah, because, you know, I could not come here without financial aid. And the next day, I went to see my guidance counselor and told her what happened. And she got right on the phone, been in there, and called the college and told them they had to give me scholarship money so I could come here and they did.

CS: That's phenomenal. So, it was not- it was not- I guess in your high school life, your scholastic life, college was not necessarily a certainty.

SC: Oh, no. I mean, it was a goal. I decided when I was in seventh grade that I wanted to go to college. But it was not in any sense a certainty because, you know, people, well, my cousin went to secretarial school, so that might have been okay, you know, but the concept of a liberal arts education was not at all in anyone's minds, in any of the adults, aunts, uncles, parents. So ...

CS: Were your parents, when you made that decision, though, and you were going to go, you were dead set on doing it, were they both very supportive? Or how would you kind of characterize how they thought about once it was an inevitability that you were going?

SC: They were okay. You know, they didn't, after Miss Baldwin talked to my mother, they, you know, accepted that this is something that should happen and they didn't try to dissuade me or anything at that point. They were stereotypical New England parents; they did not praise very easily. For example, when I got my hair cut, my father would say, what happened, you fall down the cellar steps? Because naturally your hair comes out when you fall down cellar steps. So it was, you know, I'm not a, you know, if I got A's in school, that was good. They were, you know, it was good that you got A's. If I got a D, that was okay. There was not a lot of encouragement academically.

CS: What- what about your peers in high school? Was it- were you kind of an outlier in terms of not only going to college, but your choice of colleges?

SC: No, because in those days, a lot of high schools had programs where kids were divided up into honors courses and standard courses and I forget what the other one was called. And I was in the honors courses, so everyone in my classes was planning to go to college. There were other kids like me, whose families were, you know, from a strong working-class background, who were also, you know, having to push a little for it to be considered, but everyone in the classes, you know, had a vision of doing it.

CS: What was the- what was it like when you first arrived here?

SC: It was- my first semester was hard because I had, you know, grown up in a place where you went to bed at a certain time and, you know, there were lots of rules and so I didn't have a lot of choices about how I did things or when I did things. And so, the first semester of college, where all of a sudden there's no one saying, okay, it's 10 o'clock, you need to be in bed with the lights out, no reading and it was a little bit of a struggle to find my feet and that was not my best semester. But, and I really, you know, my advisor- the dorm had a faculty advisor assigned -- I lived in Lazrus House, which was a co-op and so it was small, so everybody had the same advisor -- and when I said I was going to take calculus, he said, I don't think that's a good idea. But I went ahead and took it anyways, and it was not a good idea. But, you know, after that semester, everything was fine

CS: But was that- that kind of that sense of just not having a lot of structure, right, was that very common, though? I mean, I imagine that, I mean, even for me, right, I think regardless of when you are, you know, going through college, you're- you're leaving an environment typically, right, where you've got a parent or parents or guardians, right? There's structure. In college, you know, you might have a little bit going in, like sports, but otherwise it's ...

SC: I think that if you have parents who have gone to college, though, you have an advantage because they can give you some preparation, in a sense. I mean, when my child went to college, it was much easier for them, in a sense, because they knew that I had done it and that- and I had talked about things about, you know, strategies for studying and, you know, and things like that beforehand, whereas I was going in pretty cold and because, you know, my mother had never lived on her own. She was an orphan, and she lived with her aunt, and she lived with her aunt until she got married, you know, and so she wouldn't have thought about how to prepare someone to go into a setting in a college. She would not0 she knew nothing about it.

CS: That's that- makes a lot of sense. And you mentioned that you studied zoology. Or you majored in it, but how did you arrive at that?

SC: Well, I loved English, and I was working on doing a double major, actually and then I took Biology- Biology 101 to fulfill the science course requirement and I loved that, too. And I realized I was actually much better at Biology and Zoology than I was at English. And so...

CS: So was English one of the courses that you struggled in that first semester, then, making that transition?

SC: No, no, no, no, no.

CS: No, it was...

SC: Calculus.

CS: Calculus.

SC: Because I'd always been really good at math in school and so it was just such a... it just threw me so much to have a struggle with math. And the other one I took was a politics course.

CS: Really?

SC: And it just- because I was learning how to study and learning how to organize my time and stuff and that just was, you know, not an easy- easy course for me. But, you know, I took history courses as part of my English major, and they were fine. It was just that one politics course threw me. But, I mean, I did- I graduated with distinction in my major, at least.

CS: Did you have- did you pick zoology fairly early on? Was it, like, your freshman year?

SC: No, I took Biology 101 in the first semester of my sophomore year, so I had to do a little bit of summer courses to make up for starting late. So, I took chemistry, two semesters of chemistry, during the summer at UConn.

CS: Did you really?

SC: Yeah, and we lived so close to UConn that it was easy for me to get there and take those.

CS: What was it about that major, though, other than finding, I guess, early success in it, is there anything specific about that, though, that kind of really guided that decision? Was it a career or ...

SC: Well, I mean, I just love learning about animals. My special interest was in neurobiology and animal behavior and I went on to do a master's degree in- that was focused on animal behavior, the neurological basis of animal behavior. And then I also started a PhD and did a lot of my research, but then I went through a bout of depression and in those days, schools didn't help you out much.

CS: No, no, I'm sure that wasn't the case. Was- was that major, was it a well-developed major at that stage of the College?

SC: Oh, zoology? Yes, yes, it was well-established. You did biology 101, and you had professors from both zoology and botany. And at that point, ecology was part of botany. And then they split so that you chose either botany or zoology.

CS: Got it.

SC: And so, I chose Zoology because, as I said, I was interested in animal behavior.

CS: And what was the- I guess, how would you describe the evolution of your campus experience from your first year to the year that you graduated? What was the- and obviously, walking, I think, this time of year around campus, you don't really get a sense of, you know, how students interact or maybe just have a general sense of how they do for your daughter, but how would you- what were your days like?

SC: Well, because of living in the co-op, it was a little different than if I had lived in one of, we called them the big dorms, because, you know, we had the commitments to do the cooking and cleaning.

CS: Yes, I actually totally forgot about that.

SC: And it was very small.

CS: And now, because the reservoirs are gone, Lazarus House kind of feels like it's on campus. You can, you know, see it from right outside the library, but when the City of New London had two reservoirs in that spot, and they were built up, you could not see Lazarus House and so, the only thing near Lazarus was the infirmary. And so, it was really being a little more cut off from the rest of campus, so, in some ways, you did not- you didn't meet as many people just because it was such a tiny dorm and it was a little isolated. Now, I worked on the campus newspaper for

a few years. Yeah, I wrote articles for the campus newspaper for a few years. So, I met some people that way that I wouldn't otherwise have met, but, it was- and it was an all-girls dorm. And so, it was one thing that was really astonishing, it happened that I had, I think, two classes that had a boy in them and none of my, you know, cohort in the dorm, the other freshmen, had boys in their classes. And it was like, oh, you've got boys in your classes?

CS: That is, so that's really interesting. So, did you- did you feel like it was a co-ed campus at that point? Like, did you, or was it overwhelmingly ...

SC: I didn't feel as co-ed at that point, no. And- and coming in, the, you know, the most of- I mean, the other years' class presidents and everything, they were all women and the editor of the newspaper was a woman. You know, the leadership positions were, you know, mostly filled by women at that point. So, you really kind of felt the all-girls aspect of it more and there ended up, I guess, being about 80 guys in our classes.

CS: Out of how many?

SC: I don't know. I always think of it as in the upper 300s. But some of the other people have said it's more like- there was more like 400.

CS: Okay, yeah, your number was probably closer to how I would have guessed it being too. So, roughly 25% of the class was male?

SC: By the time we left, but when we started, we had a lot of guys transfer in. When we started, I think there were only 30 or 40.

CS: Wow. So, what was the social life like? I mean, for- how would you describe it generally? Obviously, you had your own unique experience, right? But was there a lot of fraternization? Were there parties?

SC: Well, yes, there were parties. I mean, at that time, the Coast Guard had been, and might still have been, all men.

CS: Yeah, that's true.

SC: So, there were mixers between here and the Coast Guard Academy.

CS: Yeah, would they often just kind of make their way up the hill here, or ..

SC: Well, they were on a very strict schedule. So, it was only when there were particular times when they had to leave or if there was a scheduled social event. We did not have Coasties wandering around.

CS: We may have had some my year, but yeah.

SC: But, oh, I'm sure there's still people that date Coast Guard people.

CS: I have a friend who married one, yeah.

SC: And- but, I wasn't really, you know, thinking about that. And people would come, you know, someone would have a boyfriend at Yale, and if there was going to be a dance, he would bring a bunch of his friends. So, for social events, it didn't really seem that, like the boys were that sparse.

CS: Did- were people- did people, like, go off campus to do things, or was it very much an insular kind of college experience?

SC: You know, we've talked about that a lot this weekend because we did that walking tour of downtown New London and almost no one on the walking tour had ever really gone to downtown New London before, because most people didn't have cars. There's that terrible intersection where 32 and, you know, 95, you know, you don't want to walk through there. I think they might have a pedestrian overpass or something there now, but I don't know.

CS: It's a long walk, too.

SC: And it's a long walk. And so, people did not go off campus as much unless they had a car. But in order to be in co-op, you could not have a car.

CS: Oh, interesting.

SC: So, that was one of the rules about having that form of scholarship. I mean, it was a good form of scholarship, don't get me wrong, but, you know, there were rules with it.

CS: Interesting. So, you finished Conn, and you went immediately into a master's program?

SC: I did at the University of Virginia.

CS: Very good.

SC: Was- and so, you spent, what, two years there? How many years was that program?

CS: I was there for two years.

SC: I encountered one of the problems for women at that time period, UVA had just gone co-ed ...

CS: My gosh, I had forgotten that.

SC: and the professor I wanted to work with, the neurobiologist I wanted to work with, didn't want girls in his lab.

CS: Wow, really?

SC: And I was the top student in my first year in graduate school there in the biology department, and he didn't want me in his lab.

CS: That is- so, how did you overcome that?

SC: There was another neurobiologist there, and unfortunately he had not gotten tenure, but he was going to be there for the next year, so, that's why I did a master's there instead of a PhD. And then I went on to Boston University and so, my supervisor at the University of Virginia had not gotten tenure because he was from a working class background, as was I and then I went to Boston University Marine Program in Woods Hole.

CS: That's cool.

SC: Oh, it was so cool. It was so cool.

CS: But unfortunately, my supervisor there was up for tenure, and he was- he was Jewish.

SC: And the person he was up for tenure against was, you know, this European flautist who played with the Boston Symphony when he wasn't doing marine biology and so, it looked like he wasn't going to get tenure. And it was just too depressing to go through it with a person you thought was a wonderful professor twice.

CS: Sure.

SC: And that was why I got so depressed, but I'm afraid we're going to have to stop.

CS: Oh, let me just round this out. So, in the years since, you ended the PhD program. What have you been doing ever since?

SC: Well, it wasn't too long after that, I got married and then I've done a lot of things. I did stay home with my child because my husband's a doctor, and a child needs at least one parent. And- but I've worked as a children's librarian, and I've done a lot of volunteer work. I was a chaplain associate at the hospital in Coblesville, New York.

CS: Where he worked or a different ...

SC: No. He was working in the Albany region, and Coblesville is another, like, about 40 miles from Albany, but we lived outside of Albany at that point. And then I started substitute teaching at the school my child had gone to, because they were desperate for subs, and I knew I could do it. And this is where a liberal arts education comes in really good, because I could walk into any classroom and pick up and, you know, not just run the class, but it was almost like the teacher wasn't there.

CS: That's awesome.

SC: So, even though I didn't have teaching certification, the teachers wanted me because it was like they didn't lose a day. And that included in Spanish, which I do not speak.

CS: It's funny, I do think that that is very powerful and I was talking to my peers right before you and I got a chance to talk. They have two older kids, one of whom graduated college from here two years ago. She's now working as an eco-scientist outside of Boston. And their younger son, who's, I guess, a sophomore, I think, at Colgate. But we were talking about- I was telling my experience with my nieces and some of the members of my family that are going through the process of picking schools now or going through colleges now, there's very much more of a -- at least this is a small sample size, right -- but the focus seems to be very much on, you know, I want to go to school with a focus on bridging that to a career.

SC: Yes, that is- that is true. But the kids who go through that are never going to have a high school student say to them, Ms. Cole, are you a genius or something?

CS: That's certainly worth a liberal arts education.

SC: Yes.

CS: There's no question.

SC: Well, thank you very much for your time. It was so nice to talk with you.

CS: Thank you. It was fun.

SC: Yeah, it was fun.

CS: So are you going back tonight, tomorrow?

SC: Tomorrow is Sunday, yes.

CS: Very good.

SC: Yes. So, okay, this was a lot of fun.

CS: Yeah, it was a real pleasure meeting you.