

University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives
Delta Sigma Theta Oral History Project
Interviewee: Connie Rolison Corbett
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Bethany Anderson: Today is May 22, 2018 and I'm Bethany Anderson from the University of Illinois Archives. I'm in room 317 in the Illini Union with Connie Rolison Corbett to talk with her about her time as a student at the University of Illinois and in the Delta Sigma Theta Alpha Nu chapter. Alright Connie, thank you for talking with me today. So what years were you here at the University of Illinois?

Connie Rolison Corbett: From '63 to '66 here in Urbana, and then '66-'67 at the medical center in Chicago, the fourth year in my major was up there.

Anderson: And speaking of your major, what was your major while you were a student there?

Corbett: Medical technology.

Anderson: And what year did you join the Alpha Nu chapter?

Corbett: '64, I believe, yeah. I came – yeah, '64, probably '64, yes.

Anderson: And how did you get introduced to the Alpha Nu chapter, what was the thing or person?

Corbett: What happened was the – I graduated from high school in 1962, and I actually had a full university scholarship to Ohio University in Athens, and I went for a year. I was lonely, and a very, very good friend of mine who I was in high school with was here. So though my family was particularly upset with me giving up that tuition scholarship, I transferred to Illinois. And she was pledging Alpha Nu, and so it was a natural.

Anderson: And were you from Illinois or are you from...

Corbett: No, New York.

Anderson: You're from New York originally? Okay. So how did being one of around 200 black students on campus of roughly 24,000 affect your college experience?

Corbett: Well, it made us very cognizant of the fact that we were one among many, and it really forged the closeness, especially in Alpha Nu as you can see, we've been – this is, what, 50, 60 years that we've been coming together, so it gave me – like I said, being one among many made us bond together more for, you know, socialization and that was – I would think that was mainly...and then it also heightened the fact that we had to do well, because we were representative of our race and we were careful not to bring discredit in any way, shape or form...we were essentially surrounded. But it also – it also encouraged activism, 'cause back then was the beginning of the whole civil rights thing. And I was just reminded of this before I came in here, that the woman who – my friend who – the reason I transferred here, and another Delta, we were all Delta's at that time, we participated in a sit-in in Champaign at the National Realtor's Office, there was a National Realtors thing, issue with the realtors throughout the country, and I – we were probably members of SNCC, the campus Student Non-Violent Coordinating

Committee, and set up protests and sit-ins, and we were arrested. And we spent the night in jail with a bunch of other people, also arrested, and...you know, we had to do the whole go limp and lifted us out like a potato sacks and threw us in...and it was quite a...quite a unforgettable, to say the least, experience.

Anderson: And what year was that, I'm sorry?

Corbett: Probably '65, I think. Yeah. So...because we were here, and we were the only ones, so to speak, here, we felt the need to represent and be active. So yes, there's a famous picture of me coming out of the jail, the Illini, the paper – I don't know – but coming out the next day as, you know, one of the students who was arrested for...

Anderson: This is in the student paper, the Daily Illini?

Corbett: Yeah, Daily Illini, yeah. Yeah. Now I might not have the year right but you know, it had to be during that period, yeah. So that – that's what...being to me – those were the things, the two things, the bond that we had formed to protect each other and then the whole activism thing, I think, being just two hundred among 24,000 or whatever, yeah.

Anderson: So were you protesting the National Realtors for unfair and racist housing?

Corbett: Housing, yeah, discriminatory housing.

Anderson: And about how many people were at this protest, do you recall?

Corbett: Well I know the three of us were arrested together, and there was more than just us, so I would say...maybe between ten and twenty, I would say, people, because I think, if I recall – and you know, my memory of that is not all that great, we would take shifts, almost, and you know, we would sit for a while and then somebody else would come and sit so that we could, you know, we could use the facilities and whatnot.

Anderson: So you mentioned being sort of, you know, surrounded by a largely white campus, while being, you know, one of a few black students here on campus. Did you feel any need to seek any counsel or support if there was any that was being given to students, and if so from whom?

Corbett: I don't – I either didn't need it or they didn't have it, because my counsel or support came from the other black students, specifically – mainly, the Deltas. I don't recall – like I said, I don't recall needing it, so it doesn't mean it wasn't there. But the Deltas, you know, to join a sorority, you pledge and you have to get certain grades. And when I was in Ohio, I went to Ohio University feeling somewhat of an inferiority complex, wondering if I could match up, if I could keep up with the white students in the school, in the class. And I remember I had a microbiology class and I got the highest grade. And that really just opened my eyes that, yeah I belong here and I can do it. So when I come to Illinois, the Deltas were a very – and still are very high on scholarship. We had study periods – you know, four study times, you know, and I managed to get – we were on a – I don't know what system they're on now but back then it was a five point system. And I – the year I pledged, that semester that I pledged, I got a 4.9, which, you know, again it's, it's...but Ohio really opened my eyes and said I could do it, and then I was able to do it, you know, so it...you know, it was a lot of self-reinforcement and reinforcement by our little community.

Anderson: So sounds like – yeah it was, you know, an affirming community in many ways. What else do you recall about your time being a part of the Alpha Nu chapter here on campus?

Corbett: It was just a lot of fun. As a result, especially of the becoming – getting that 4.9, the National Organization recognized that as, me being at the University of Illinois, and managing to get that 4.9, so I was selected to be a National Second Vice President – that's the office that represents all of the undergrads throughout the country. And that office afforded me travel, and I remember meeting Martin Luther King at the – in Los Angeles doing the...the Watts – I believe it was the Watts – whichever one of those riots was in the mid-sixties. We had a national convention at the same time, and he came, and the national organization presented him a monetary donation on behalf of the Deltas. And I have a picture with him, and Dorothy Haight, and you know... So that's another positive thing that came out of the University of Illinois, yeah, definitely.

Anderson: So what did you do after you graduated in 1967?

Corbett: Yeah, as I said my degree was in medical technology, and my last year, which was a twelve-month year, it was like an internship, like a residency-type – was at the University of Illinois Hospital on the west side. And... it was like I said, twelve months, and – where we study all of the disciplines, blood bank, the microbiology lab, the...all of the medical aspects of being a medical technologist. So of course spent a lot of time in the hospital itself, on the floor with patients. And in a very belated way, that's when I decided that I didn't wanna do that, 'cause I didn't feel...the hospital made me sad. You know, you have to have a certain personality to do well at that. I did well, but I did not like it. So, medical technology prepares you to work in any type of entry-level lab setting, so I end up going into food research. Standard Oil of Indiana, which had a lab in Whiting, Indiana, which is right across the line from Chicago. And I stayed in Chicago, and I started working in Whiting, Indiana in Standard Oil. I met some friends who lived in Gary, and that was around the time that Richard Hatcher, the first black mayor of Gary...then I moved to Gary, to with... I stayed at Standard Oil but I lived in Gary to help out with his campaign and his administration I guess for a couple years, two or three years, then I moved back to New York to be with family.

Anderson: What year was that?

Corbett: '70. Went back to New York in '70. I also knew that I needed to get a master's, a graduate degree, if I wanted to advance further in my profession, so I went to got a full ride, grad scholarship to the University of Connecticut, and got my master's there, at UConn. And...worked for Fleischmann Laboratories, worked for Continental Baking Company, they used to put out Wonder Bread and Morton Frozen Foods, and all of this is in foods now, food development, food research, and...[?] Chemical Company, again, in their food ingredients division, because food became – that was it, once I decided I didn't want medical technology and went to Standard Oil in Whiting, I stayed on that course. And the only thing I would say is that I saved my best job for last, and my best job was the director of food, foods [?] and safety testing for consumers' union, publishers of consumer reports magazine. I retired from there.

Anderson: What year was that, then?

Corbett: Well I retired from there, my full time job, in January of 2002, and I wasn't yet 65, wasn't eligible for Medicare, so I took I think about nine months off and I went back and worked part time at a

food bank, as the nutrition manager at a food bank to help with health insurance and all the rest of that stuff, then retired from there, then in 2006 moved – relocated from New York with my husband to Virginia, cost of living. And also the same woman, the same lady friend who got me to Illinois, she had been living – when she left Champaign, she went to Virginia, to Richmond. And so between here and another very, very good friend of ours who also lived in that area, who had lived in New York then moved there, we said, “let’s go to Richmond,” so I...

Anderson: Went to Virginia, yeah.

Corbett: Yeah, right. Cost of living, taxes, temperature, everything.

Anderson: It has everything, yeah. I’ve never been there but yeah, I’ve seen photos and it looks like beautiful landscapes, so yeah. So in thinking about your career and your life since leaving the University of Illinois, what sort of lessons from that experience did you apply to other aspects of your life?

Corbett: Well, when you say we’re 200 among 24,000, we’re still that way. And I’ve been – throughout my professional life, I don’t know, I can’t count the number of times, I was the only black person and the only woman in the room, because I quickly achieved managerial – entry level manager and up, so... you just learn to get how to act and how to be comfortable, and who to – who’s real and who’s not real. And you run into.. it’s – some of the things that folks go through now are, unfortunately are so much worse than maybe some of the things I went through, but... you know, you get a sign, you get a desk that is full of splinters, and every day I had to be careful that I didn’t run my stockings, and this is – how come I, and nobody else is in that situation, you come into work one day and your office has been moved. And someone came in and packed up my office and moved it to another room. And management agreed with this, now, in order for that to happen. But my white counterparts, peers, they were moved, but they were told beforehand that this is going to happen and we will provide someone to come in and move you, and... I came in one day and it was done, it was a done deal, it was almost – I can’t remember if I was on vacation and I came back and it was done, but, I came back and it was done, and that was really... So those are the things you learn to deal with. You know, and... when I left that job, when people leave that job, and often with jobs now when you leave them, they have going away parties and stuff... I had a good manager, he was a good guy, I liked him, John, a lot, and he... as was normally their role, they would set up the party, but...we had it at a local bar/restaurant type thing, and not many many many people showed up. But you know, I was leaving at that point, so. By contrast, my staff at consumers’ union when I left – I have a DVD of that thing – it wasn’t a DVD, it was a tape is what it is, they invited my family, they put on a skit, it was such a big difference, so. Those are the things that just come to mind off the top of my head, I’m sure there are – but also I must say that along the way I made a very close friend, a white woman, she and I when I was at [?] before I went to consumers’ union, we are still very close, she lives in Florida and I’ve been to her house, spent the night, we’ve stayed in contact all of these years. It wasn’t all bad but it certainly made you resilient and...in addition to being resilient it made you know that you – that I can compete. I knew I had to be – I knew my parents, and their parents, and their parents, for years and years and years, we’ve always been told that you have to be twice or three times as good, and it was true then and it’s still true, unfortunately, it still is.

Anderson: So kind of related to that in a sense, what would be some of the most important advice you could give to a young black woman wanting to be effective and relevant in today’s world?

Corbett: I would say follow your heart, both professionally and personally. Don't be... bogged down by convention, like a lot of these young ladies, they think they need to be married by a certain age, they need to have babies, they – no you don't, and you don't have to settle for just because this guy is willing to marry you – maybe you need to pay attention to... compatibilities and...you know, anticipating being with this person for twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years, and having similar interests and goals. And but if you... like there's a young girl who – a lot of these young ladies are doing it, there's this young lady who I'm sort of an aunt slash godmother, and she came here and graduated with a doctorate here in animal science, and Kendra now is in the Peace Corps in Senegal. And I said to her, I just wish I had done that type – when I was younger and not married and free – I wish I had had the courage, the foresight to do that. So my thing to these young ladies is follow your heart, both professionally and personally and... don't limit yourself. You know, don't be afraid to step out of the box, 'cause for me to go to Peace Corps – that would have been just... you talk about being upset because I left Ohio or being because I got arrested for a night, that would have been bananas. You know, but...and one thing, the kids have much more, they have a lot more opportunity to spread their wings than we did, so I would hope that they would take advantage of that opportunity and not get bogged down in doing what they think they're supposed to do. Do what you...do what you, you know, that really really...completes you and makes you feel good about yourself.

Anderson: So I wanted to ask you a few questions about the sorority. So what do you think the sorority should focus on in the next few years?

Corbett: Well... I think the sorority should be very politically active. I think the sorority should encourage its members to be politically aware and active themselves and encourage the members to encourage others to be politically aware and politically active, I think both from a... a standpoint of traditional politics as well as a standpoint of women, empowering women, strengthening women. The sorority is in a very unique position to do that, they already have these young girls' hearts, so I think we need to – and Delta is pretty good at that, Delta is good at that, probably. I haven't been that much particularly active with the national organization, but based on what I do know, I think they could probably just encourage that even more, I think.

Anderson: Yeah. And, could you talk about your current involvement as an alumna?

Corbett: Well, honestly, as I said, I haven't been that particularly active with the national organization, excuse me, my current involvement as an alumna with the Deltas? Is this group. All of us were pledged in the sixties, the mid-sixties, and we have been since, I think 1990, our first reunion was here, the first one we had when we came back in 1990, and... maybe for a couple years we met every year, but then it became a biannual, and what we would do is – by that time of course we were all scattered throughout the country, and we would pick a city where somebody was, so somebody could be the host. This is a little difficult because nobody's here but we have a number of members in Chicago so we were able to...and through this alumni group, we have a scholarship fund here, named after one of our members who passed. And she – she was one that sort of followed herself, because when she passed she was in Africa on a fellowship, and it was a bus accident. But she took that leap, so she worked for IBM for a while but then she followed her... but that has been, and continues to be the main involvement with the sorority. Sometimes we all almost say that we pledged Alpha Nu much more than we pledged Delta, because Alpha Nu has meant so much to us.

Anderson: Are there any sort of final thoughts you'd like to share about your time as a student here or as a part of Alpha Nu?

Corbett: I'm glad I came. It's – my time as a student here, and all of the relationships I forged, and all of the experiences I had as a result of being a student here have...helped give me a good, fulfilling life...help me get through tough times, but also point at me in the direction of good times. So...it's been – I don't wanna – I'm so happy – it's possible that if I'd have stayed in Ohio I would have been – because even then in Ohio, I knew that my friend Sandra was pledging Delta here, and they did not have a Delta chapter there, so I am actually a charter member of a Delta chapter – because we started one in Ohio.

Anderson: Yeah, we started one in Ohio, but I left – we were all pledges, because when you start you're all pledges, and the national organization, or like the Columbus, Ohio or some – they guide you, and we were in the throes of starting – and they have a chapter there now so. Delta's been a big part of my life, you know, and it's been a good part, and I have friends that fifty, sixty year old – for fifty, sixty years, friends who, you know, we're in each other's weddings, we attend funerals unfortunately, we have godchildren...it's just been a very good lifelong experience.

Anderson: Well thank you so much Connie for talking with me today.

Corbett: You're welcome, you're welcome, thank you.