

University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives
Delta Sigma Theta Oral History Project
Interviewee: Jo Jones
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Anna Trammell: Okay. So my name is Anna Trammell and I'm from the Student Life and Culture Archives at the University of Illinois. Today is May 22, 2018, and I'm here in the Illini Union speaking with Jo Jones about her time as a student at the University of Illinois and as a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Incorporated's Alpha Nu chapter. So I'd like to begin by hearing a little about how you arrived to the University of Illinois, how did you decide to come here?

Jo Jones: Well, I grew up in Decatur, Illinois, so that's, what, 48 miles away — you know, less than fifty miles away. My brother was a student here, he's two years older than I am and so he started here in 1957. And it just seemed like a reasonable thing to do kind of thing.

Trammell: So can you describe a little bit about arriving to the U of I, what year did you come to campus, what did you decide to study?

Jones: I came here, um 1959 — fall of 1959. I — at that time, you know, keep it in mind that, you know, the whole idea of women having professions, it was sort of [?], just wasn't what happened. So I was like a lot of female students, I knew about being a teacher, a nurse, or a social worker. I didn't want to be a nurse, didn't want to be a social worker, so I had settled on teaching. And that always — and you know, that seemed like a logical thing to do. So, I thought I was [light laugh] gonna go into teaching mathematics and for some reason I went into the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences rather than the College of Education. So of course that meant I had to take foreign language and a lot of other things. But in the end, I think it was probably a wise decision because I think that the breadth of the education was greater in liberal arts. So yeah that's — I came — I said I came fall of 1959 with all of the energy and enthusiasm of a seventeen, almost eighteen year old.

Trammell: So how did being one of around 200 black students out of 24,000 on campus affect your college experience?

Jones: I would say in retrospect, analyzing it and thinking about it, I probably didn't get as much out of the experience as I might have. Certainly my children had a much broader experience when they went away to college. But of course they went to college in the late — in the mid to late 80s — 1980s. So, you know, you're talking about a thirty year difference. I enjoyed every day I spent as an undergraduate on this campus. Some days were better than others, obviously, but I would say that I had a lot of fun, I met a lot of people, I found out a lot about myself and who I was and who I wanted to be. I didn't get involved though in a lot of campus life, and I think being just one of, you know, 200 black students and that included of course graduate students as well as undergraduates. So the undergraduates would have been an even smaller number. But we did have our own activities and that was of course one of the reasons I got into the sorority, because it became that family away from home, that family away from family and it gave me that kind of grounding that I might not have had otherwise. But, as I said, I think I was about a senior and there was a fellow student who made the comment of "we're paying tuition and fees just like everybody else, we should participate in what's going on," and I think he was right about that. So I think the small number in some ways — I don't want to say encouraged us to isolate ourselves but it made it comfortable to do that, it made it comfortable to do that. But no, [?]. It was a great experience. If I had to do it over again, would I do it differently knowing what I know today,

yes probably so. Even with that small number, I probably would have done it differently. But that would have been, you know they say, hindsight is always 20/20.

Trammell: So can you talk a little bit about your decision to join Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Incorporated? Did you know members or did you hear about that organization once you arrived on campus?

Jones: My brother, when he was here, my brother was a member of Omega Psi Phi and Omega Psi Phi and the Deltas have historically had sort of a brother-sister kind of relationship on various campuses, they sort of identified with one another. And when I was a senior in high school I came over to visit campus and I stayed at the Delta house. And so I had that sort of opportunity to meet them at that time. So I did know one or two of the people who were in the house when I came. But it was — there were only two African American sororities on campus at that times and the Deltas were just a better fit for my personality, you know, and the people that I sort of, in the residence hall — I guess they called them dormitories in those days — the people that I sort of interacted with, sort of hung out with were more inclined to be Deltas. So that was how I got involved and how I joined. I pledged fall of 1960, I guess it was, because I was initiated in 1961 in the Spring.

Trammell: Can you just talk a little bit more about your experience as a member of the sorority? Some of your best memories or most memorable moments that you have from your involvement with Delta Sigma Theta?

Jones: Oh boy. I would say probably — oh, best memories — oh there a lot of fun times, a lot of fun times. Met a lot of people — well, people that I'm still friends with, associated with to this day and it's been, you know, 55 years, you know. It was a very interesting experience, played a lot of cards [laughter]. What was interesting is it — I didn't watch television a lot, didn't really know a lot about — I mean other than that what I was doing in class I wasn't really connected to the news, I mean I wasn't like reading the newspaper every day and all of that. It was just really a good time, a good time in terms of meeting people and making friendships and bonding with people. And as I say, learning a lot about myself and who I am and who I would eventually turn out to be. In 1962, summer of '62, our national decided to sell our house and of course on this campus to be a social sorority you had to have a house. So that summer I came — I've been trying to remember it, and I think I must have gotten a phone call from our regional director that she was gonna be at the house and so I came over and met her at the house, and we walked through and she explained the decision had been made to sell the house, and like any — what, I guess I was not quite 21, I turned 21 that fall — you know, it was like this is like — what do I do? What, what what? You know, you think it's sort of the end of the world. And of course, you don't have the understanding or the depth of analysis and ability to figure things out and so it was not a decision that, of course, made me happy or any of those of us who were still on — who were gonna be on campus in the fall. So, that was sort of a change and I guess that summer I kind of found out what kind of abilities and talents that I had and early in that fall I was able to work with the Dean of Women and we were able to get the chapter established as a service organization and the rest, as they say, is history. We went on and...I think we had a line of fifteen, and I think eventually twelve of those were — twelve of those were actually initiated, and they have — there been a few low points since that time, but we have survived. So, probably the high point of my experience with the sorority was the Spring of 19 — what would that have been — 1963 because I graduated in '63 -- was initiating, I think, eight of the fifteen that we had pledged, and leaving a chapter that was actually in better shape than it was when I joined it. So that was my — the high point, I think.

Trammell: Well, can you talk a little bit more about that part of the history of the Alpha Nu chapter? So you found out that you were no longer going to be able to stay in your

house, do you feel like that negatively impacted the organization? How did you figure out that the way forward would be to convert the organization into a service fraternity? How did you find assistance or know where to go to be able to make those changes?

Jones: You know, I've been -- ever since Ellie sent the email, I've been trying to remember that [light laugh], and I'm -- it's been fifty-five years -- no it would have been fifty-six years ago -- I just for the life of me cannot recall the thought process, what happened, how did I think this through, how did -- who did I talk to. I just -- I cannot recall that at all. But I did -- I do know that I went to see Dean Sheldon and it may be that just by going to see her -- which of course I knew you had to go to that office simply because even when we were in Panhellenic you had to go in that building and in that office and deal with them in terms of doing -- processing your paperwork for pledges and initiations and all of that sort of thing. So I was aware of the office and I was aware of her, and all I can think of is either I talked to somebody or just somehow a lightbulb -- boop -- came on and I said, oh this is what you need -- I just don't know how that worked out. I think Ellie found some -- no, she says that I sent her this -- these materials, I just don't remember them. But when I saw the handwriting, I said it's my handwriting. So I had to have written it. So I do not recall, I do not recall ever writing it or making the petition to the Dean of Women, but apparently I did. And we were able to work that through, and I think in many ways, certainly at that time, I think we actually became a stronger organization. And, you know in hindsight here again, you know that 20/20 hindsight we all get, it was a perfectly logical move for the national organization to stop subsidizing the house, that made perfectly good sense. The organization did not have houses across the country like, you know, white sororities. They just didn't have those. And so it didn't make sense from a financial perspective, it was perfectly logical. But as I said, you know, when you're twenty, twenty-one years old you think things are the end of the world. So that was kind of how that all worked out, but as I said, I don't know whether somehow I went in to see the Dean and she explained to me what my options were or rather... somebody else said you should go do this. I have to admit that time has erased that from the memory bank [laughter].

Trammell: So now, what do you think the sorority should focus on in the future, over the next few years?

Jones: Oh I, I would say probably an important part of just everything -- the sorority as well as other organizations for women -- I think we just need to get more of a sense that we have something to offer, that times are changing, that increasingly women are going more and more into the workforce, that becoming professionals, and being professionals -- as I said, when I came, started college 1959, what I knew about was nursing, I knew about being a physician but nobody's gonna do that, a social worker, a schoolteacher. You'll be a schoolteacher because you can then have a family, have children and you can be home with your children in the summertime and once they start school, your schedules are somewhat similar. I think that now that's so different and what women want to achieve, what they aspire to is so much broader. I think the sorority just needs to focus on helping each member dream big, achieve her goals, achieve her dreams, to have a good sense of self, to be positive, and looking at... the mission of the organization, doing more or thinking more about service, being in service to others, service to the community, because I think it's in doing that you really begin to feel that it really matters that you've been here. I've had a -- one of the housemates when we had the house, she used to talk about when she would encounter people that she thought were not, you know, the world's greatest people, she always would talk about them breathing air and taking up space that somebody else could use. I think the whole thing is you want to focus on doing things such that it matters. That when you, your life comes to an end, which it will, that it will have mattered that you were here. And that doesn't mean that you have to find a cure for cancer or be an astronaut and go to Mars, it

may be something just as simple as being kind to an elderly neighbor and making that person's life easier. So I just think that it is focusing on developing grounded individuals, but people who are well-developed in terms of personality, and sense of... you have to give back. Some of us talk about giving back, some of us talk about paying forward, but in whatever way you want to phrase it, I think the sorority needs to focus on the developing that kind of person, that kind of personality, that kind of individual.

Trammell: What is the most important advice that you would give a young black woman wanting to be effective and relevant in today's world?

Jones: Be prepared. Preparation. Hard work and preparation. There is no such thing as luck. It's hard work and preparation. If you've worked hard and if you're prepared, when opportunities arise, you'll be able to fill in, move into that space. So as much as anything, I would encourage any young black woman to be – to work hard, be prepared, to have a good sense of self, positive image, think positive, and know that you have value and worth, that your opinion counts, you're going to face challenges, there will always be inequities, that's just the way the world is. But dream big. Dream big dreams and work toward them.

Trammell: Those are all the questions I have, thank you so much for speaking with me today.

Jones: It's not a problem.