

INTERVIEWER: This is the 150th Oral History Project, and this is Dr. Phillip Clay. And I guess I'd like to start out -- we're interested in stories -- so can you tell me a little bit about where you were born and what it was like growing up in Wilmington?

CLAY: I was born in Wilmington, North Carolina, and I was born in the late mid-1940 and grew up in the 1950's and 1960's. By growing up, I mean I sort of had some idea of what was going on in the world. So I remember, on my eighth birthday, the supreme court decision, the Brown decision on desegregation occurred. I won't claim at eight years old to have understood the law, but I did understand that there was a momentous change, about which the predominant feeling among my family and people I knew was both hope and fear: hope that this would be a change and fear that the change might actually not be initially good and perhaps not apply to Wilmington. The fact is that it did not apply to Wilmington; so the entire educational experience I had in elementary and junior high and senior high school was in a segregated school. Now the truth is that for reasons I'm not quite clear, there was always a very strong educational tradition; so that after Sputnik, as occurred in many places in the US, there was a re-doubled education to accelerating educational preparation and tracking and the "talented 10th" and other dynamics were in place; so that I was among the say 30 or 40 kids in my county -- black kids in my county -- who in the fifth grade were plucked out and told, you're going to skip the seventh grade; you're going to go to an accelerated sixth grade, because, you know, the nation, you know, we have these things that we have to do. And I remember quite explicitly President Kennedy challenging the nation to the moon adventure; and I remember explicitly a deep sense that at least the "talented 10th" were destined to college.

It wasn't a question about whether we would go; it wasn't a question about making the right choices in terms of the courses you would take. There was an expectation which was communicated to my family, who very supportive, and lots of things were put in our way to make sure that we were prepared; and this ranged from the acceleration -- we skipped things like North Carolina history, that was considered not terribly important for people who were headed to the moon -- and we went straight to what would eventually be advanced science courses and what we would now call AP courses. I don't think they were called AP in those days. So I had a very good high school preparation; I had a very supportive family and I recall in the sixth grade that the smartest, the brightest bulb was not me. I think I actually graduated eighth or ninth in my class, but clearly the smartest person in the class was a young woman who was the oldest of 13 kids, and she came to school periodically. Whenever she came she did a great job; but after a while she disappeared. Now it's possible she moved away, but my guess is that, you know, she was what we would now call a "parentified" child and essentially had a stunted educational experience because of the demands of taking care of her younger siblings. And I understand that, because at least in my own family my uncles were similarly pulled out in the Depression and told, you know, it is more important for you to work than go to school; but I never had any of that kind of pressure even though I was the oldest of five boys. We were always told, you know, your job is to go to school, and the only reason you can't go to school is that, you know, your body can't hold itself together.

INTERVIEWER: So what was the environment at home? What did your parents do?

CLAY: Well, I was always encouraged. My parents -- my mother and father graduated from high school but they did not have professional jobs, and most of my family did not. Most of their siblings did not graduate from high school, and no one in my family prior to myself graduated from college.

INTERVIEWER: How did your parents support the family?

CLAY: My father was a barber, and my mother worked at various jobs.

INTERVIEWER: And your siblings?

CLAY: Well they were younger me...

INTERVIEWER: Well no, I mean did they -- tell me just a little about them -- how many --

CLAY: Well there were five, and they had various experiences; I think we were all very strongly encouraged to do high school; we all graduated from high school. I was the first to go to college, and they had various experiences and have ended up in various jobs. My second oldest brother, you know, retired before I did but, you know, that's okay.

INTERVIEWER: How did you wind up going --

CLAY: Did. I haven't retired.

INTERVIEWER: How did you wind up going to UNC at Chapel Hill?

CLAY: Well part of the push to college was, you know, every prior class where there were successful individuals in terms of going to college -- there was a great local profile to their success; so if you could imagine a graduation where the emphasis was not on how well the basketball team did or the football team, but how much scholarship money the senior class won -- I don't remember any of the numbers, but I remember the number being tallied. So there were the older brothers of my classmates and sisters, too, of my classmates who went on to Ivy League schools and to other great institutions, and they would come back to visit, you know, the Friday before Easter, or the last day before the Christmas vacation or at other times and talk about their great experiences at Columbia or Penn or some other institution. And this was designed, I guess, to motivate the rest of us, you know, that there is a reward at the end of the tunnel, and you too might win, you know, \$50,000 in scholarships, and that sort of thing, and that was very encouraging. So the older brother of one of my best friends went to UNC, and this was when going to UNC was a big deal, not because it was hard to get into, but because none of us had ever been invited to come. So he, some time during my junior year, took me back to campus, and looked around, and Chapel Hill is a very active place. And I must say that the fact that Jessie Helms thought that, you know, the whole place should be turned into a parking lot, you know, helped get my attention to it. Anything he was against, I was probably for it. So I went to the campus, I visited, and liked it very much. My friend, the younger brother of this guy, went to Duke.

INTERVIEWER: How was it that you first got interested in urban studies?

CLAY: Well, being a child of that particular period of history, I picked up on sort of what the great challenges were, and my first -- and this was in high school -- my first ambition was to be a diplomat. I thought that the Peace Corps and world peace, were the goals. I managed to convince an English teacher once that I shouldn't read -- I don't remember what novel was, but it was, in my view, a thoroughly boring novel, and I had no interest whatsoever in reading it -- so I convinced her to allow me to read the autobiography of Ralph Bunch, who was a black undersecretary of the UN, someone who had been passed over to be a senior State Department official, and who had a biography that wasn't terribly unlike my own life story. And, you know, sort of wandering through the library, I found it, you know. So that motivated me or made me become very interested in becoming a diplomat, and that lasted until maybe first or second year in college, when I heard a joke from Dick Gregory--Dick Gregory is sort of the comedian of that period-- and his comment was that Americans are willing to go halfway around the world to tell somebody else how to live, but they won't go around the corner, and they own it. And that sort of got me to thinking, well maybe the great challenges are in the US, and maybe I shouldn't be so interested in, you know, going halfway around the world to bring peace.

So I think I drifted toward law school, and I remember at some point probably as a sophomore or junior going to the library to look at -- well what do you study in law school? And needless to say, I discovered things like torts, and civil procedure, and criminal process, and so forth, and that didn't look too interesting. And I then started talking to some of my professors about what are the public service professions that are new and bold and would sort of fit into the great questions that, you know, we were studying about, because I was a sociology/urban studies major, as an undergraduate? And that's when urban planning popped up. They did not give and still don't give, at UNC, an undergraduate degree in Planning, but they gave what they call "a certificate," meaning it be the equivalent, at MIT, of a minor. So I did, and you know, I was the only undergraduate in the classes I took, and when it became time to go to graduate school, that's where I was headed.

INTERVIEWER: So how did you wind up -- what attracted you to MIT?

CLAY: Well, as many students do. They commit to go to graduate school, and then they want to know where they should apply. So I went to faculty and said, so where should I apply? And they gave me a list of five schools; MIT was at the top of the list, along with Berkeley and Harvard. I didn't want to go to the west coast, so I came to Cambridge in November, 1967, in my senior year, and I visited Harvard in the morning, and MIT in the afternoon, and at the end of the day, the choice for me was very clear. I was admitted to both, and the rest is history.

INTERVIEWER: What was it that made MIT your first choice?

CLAY: Well, I think it's as simple as describing the two 1/2 days. The 1/2 day at the other end of Massachusetts Avenue was wandering around looking at the bulletin board; I did not have an appointment; I didn't see too many people; and sitting in the classes, I didn't find it terribly interesting. I don't think anybody was unfriendly; they just weren't available. I came to MIT, and I approached a couple of people -- one of them would be the professor who would become my advisor, and he gave me about an hour. All of the department activities were concentrated in an area and, you know, it was open. I walked in and listened and looked around. People were happy to describe what it is they were doing and ask me what I was interested in. I didn't see any other part of MIT, unless, you know, it was just a matter of walking the hall. And you know, I had a sense that, you know, this is a place where I could be.

INTERVIEWER: So your graduate study for the said Master's and the PhD, how many years were you a graduate student?

CLAY: Well I was a graduate student for one year as a Master's student, and a good part of that year was spent in an unsuccessful effort to avoid being drafted. So after being away for two years, I came back in the PhD program. I'd had some thinking over the time, lots of correspondence with friends and faculty, and I came back as a PhD student. So I was a PhD student from 1974, I mean, 1971 to 1975. I graduated February of 1975, as I recall.

INTERVIEWER: And how would you describe those years as a graduate student? What's it like being a graduate student at MIT?

CLAY: It's probably not appropriate to describe it this way, that is the years as a graduate student here, but I felt it was very much like going to work. I got married just before I came back. I married in June of 1971, and I started graduate school again in September of 1971, so I lived off campus, and I had a life and I had friends who had nothing to do with MIT. And I came and I went to class and I did my projects and I did internships. I would later do research as an RA and as a Fellow at the Joint Center at Harvard Square, and so it was a very focused -- I knew what I wanted, I had good advice, very good support. And I was in a field that was outward looking.

I mean, when we did research it meant going someplace; you didn't do it in Cambridge. In fact, I was quite explicit that I would not do it in Cambridge; there could have been opportunities, but Cambridge was a bit high maintenance. You have to spend a lot of time on stuff that wasn't quite critical, whereas I could go to Cleveland or you know, Prince George's County or New York and sort of focus on why I am there and what I'm doing.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned that there was the professor who gave you an hour and then became your Advisor. Are there particular mentors that stand out from your graduate study years?

CLAY: Well, the person I'm referring to as the faculty member with whom I spent that first hour was professor Bernard Frieden, and he did become my advisor; he taught several courses -- in fact, every course he taught, I was his RA. And at the time I was a Fellow at the Joints Center for Urban Studies between Harvard and MIT; he was the director. And when he stepped down as director, and I finished my degree and became a faculty member -- that was 1975 -- then I think I kept an association with the Joint Center, as he did. And then in 1982, I became assistant director of the Joint Center. He was a wonderful man. He retired a number of years ago; he was wonderful because he was quiet and patient, had a great sense of humor, and was very generous with his students. He was -- had very high standards and high expectations; but he was also the kind of advisor who would make things happen, would say that you really had to go to this meeting; and it would be a meeting about which you had no knowledge. And he would sometimes tell you explicitly why you ought to go, and other times I think he probably said, this is a place you ought to be. He and his wife, Elaine, had his students over, you know, for events he would host at his home. And he was generous with advice, generous and gentle with his advice.

INTERVIEWER: Sounds like he looked out for you.

CLAY: I think so. And he did. I think he saw it as part of his responsibility; I wasn't the only one, there probably -- several of our colleagues, my peers, who had a similar experience with him at know roughly the same time. Many of us are still friends. And he was a very effective person in the department; he was never department head; he was briefly associate dean; but he was the kind of person who actually was able to have great influence by the questions he asked. I don't ever recall in all of the years I attended faculty meetings with him and all of the years I was his student, his ever making, what we would call, a sermon or speech; but I do recall he would ask a question, and if people didn't get the message from the question, he'd ask it again, and had a very quiet way of influencing processes.

INTERVIEWER: Have you adapted that yourself?

CLAY: Probably. I think there's a great power in universities in the questions you ask. I've always told students that sometimes you make a bigger impression by the questions you ask than the answer you give, at least initially. And I learned, you know, similarly useful lessons, from my point of view, from other colleagues. I was a social scientist and social science--especially applied social science--we don't really do experiments; you really can't. But I had one faculty -- member of our faculty -- from whom I took courses and with whom I was later a colleague, who, when things became complicated or difficult or divided and he had a particular point of view that he was pushing, he would sort of truncate the discussion by saying, well, let's experiment, let's do it this way and then in a year or two, we'll come back and discuss how it went. And that was quite disarming in many cases.

INTERVIEWER: I wanted to ask a couple of questions about your scholarship. What led you to become particularly interested in housing, housing policy?

CLAY: I don't ever remember a conversation with myself in terms of which field I chose -- a conversation with myself that said I'm going to choose housing rather than transportation or health or some other policy issue. I think it was probably a consequence of the fact that housing is the most universal transaction in the way cities develop. Now it could have been jobs and economic development, but the department really wasn't very strong in economic development at that time; we have since become much stronger in it. So I suspect the answer to the question of why housing is simply that it was the basic transaction in community building.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

CLAY: Everybody has to live somewhere.

INTERVIEWER: What are your thoughts about housing and housing policy in this country?

CLAY: Well I've had the opportunity to be engaged in the evolution of housing policy over this long period in a variety of ways: teaching it, writing about it. Second, I've had the opportunity for foundations and others to be an advisor on it, and I've been a member of a board since 1980, where we have, in Boston, and then in the last 15 years nationally, used every opportunity to explore ways of building communities that housing policy would allow. This is not only US housing policy, but the housing initiatives that states and cities came up with as well. So I've had the opportunity to be deeply involved without having to leave the academy and roll up my sleeves all day. I only roll up my sleeves once a week or once a month or two days a quarter or some other way of engaging, but still having, hopefully, made a contribution to the organizations in which I was involved, in how they would make use of resources to advance shared views about how community should develop.

INTERVIEWER: So how has that -- how have you seen the field change over the years?

CLAY: Over the years the field has changed in a variety of ways, and it's been my pleasure to observe it, both as a way of helping to prepare students, practitioners who -- and scholars who would go out into that field and how we serve the sort of social goals we have for community development. There are several things that I would describe as having emerged during this period, because, I think, it's probably fair to say the field grew rather than there being discrete cycles. So I think we've gone from a point where building public housing would be a principal way of adding to supply to a set a policies aimed at facilitating the development. So we provide tax credits to developers rather than actually the cash subsidy to build housing. We also evolved to a point of trying to balance the development of housing with the provision of cash assistance, because even though we had this evolution of support for housing development through tax credits and financing mechanisms, there was also the sense that we could possibly build housing or subsidize housing for everybody who needed it. So we developed a number of direct subsidy arrangements.

We've also revitalized the notion of home ownership. Home ownership was a big deal after World War II through the 1960's; and then it sort of fell out of favor. And I would say more recently, in the last 15 years, it has come back in favor, and we've gone through a period where we were trying to make housing accessible to a broader range of people as housing affordability escalated as a problem. To give you an illustration, when I bought my first house, the rule was that you could not spend more than 28 percent of your gross income for housing, and you had to make a downpayment of a specific amount, and that depended on what kind of loan you had. And you had to have -- meet all of the underwriting criteria. So for example, if there was a 10 percent down-payment requirement, you had to prove to a green-eye- shaded banker, that you had that money for six months prior to the time you bought the home, because they didn't want to risk that this was a secret loan that you were going to have to repay and that that would undermine your ability to afford the housing. And I remember also that they checked income; they not only wanted to see your pay stubs, they wanted a letter from your employer saying that you were employed and six weeks later when you closed on the house, they wanted a letter to make sure you were still employed, or the last week's pay stub.

Well, we obviously had a situation where not very many poor people could pass through all these filters, and so we created a variety of mechanisms that made the filters less of a barrier, and the home ownership rate, you know, all of a sudden tacked up somewhere after the mid-1990's, especially after 2000. So that was a trend, and of course, we are reaping the benefits or the bitter fruits of that effort in the current financial crisis, and you know, I think part of it is that some people were squeezed into more housing than they could afford, but there was also the issue of fraud and poor underwriting, things that, you know, never would have passed, even with relative high income people, a decade before. Another trend has been focus on community: that is, you don't just build a house, but you strengthen a housing market, or you reverse decline in an area, or you do mixed-income development, or you piggyback economic development on housing development or vice versa. So those have been some of the major trends, and each of these trends had a different life at different points over my career. I remember a push for home ownership in 1968 as a big part of the Housing Act of the Great Society, and then it sort of fell out of favor to re-emerge 25 years later, almost the same rhetoric, many of the same provisions.

INTERVIEWER: I'm not even sure if, you know, there an answer to this question, but is there a way to sort of articulate or summarize what the major obstacles are to good housing policy?

CLAY: The obstacles to housing policy are several. The big one is affordability. Housing prices and rents have gone up faster than incomes. In fact, if you were to isolate the middle class--however you define middle class really doesn't matter--but if you look at the incomes of the middle class, they have essentially been stagnant since the mid-1970's in real terms. Housing prices have not been stagnant, so it's not surprising that individuals, families, have had to devote more than that old 28 percent of their income to housing. That wouldn't be so bad, except other things have gone up: the cost of energy, insurance, our habits -- I don't think anybody had a latte or bottled water in the 1960's -- and those things add up. And I think landlords on the rental side have had a variety of motivations to raise rents or pressures to raise rents much faster than income, so affordability is the first obstacle.

Second obstacle is that we've had a struggle for turf in ways in the last generation that we did not have in previous generations. One of the first studies I did after becoming a faculty member was to look at the gentrification process, the process of middle class reclaiming of urban neighborhoods, so that cheap housing disappeared because in some locations, that housing, irrespective of what condition it was in, became an attractive location for a middle class that wanted to live in the city. If we look at some neighborhoods, the areas where the middle class reclaimed are the areas that had been the cheap housing in the previous generation. Some of the explanation for homelessness can be explained by the fact that the areas that used to be the cheapest housing, rooming houses, just the bottom of the market, was essentially pulled out in the mid-late 1970's-- and so by the early 1980's we had homelessness. And the question was where did these homeless people come from. Well, they came out of the areas that we had just reclaimed. There are other explanations, too: the de-institutionalization of the mentally ill, for example, a Recession that lasted very long, almost indefinitely in some regions and in some parts of metropolitan areas. So that change is part of the obstacle.

Another obstacle was that housing became much more of a commodity. Now, while there have been efforts at sort of the development of non-profit housing, and I've been associated with that in a number of different ways, most other efforts were aimed at commodification. We couldn't build single family houses fast enough, so we convinced Americans that, well, you can buy an apartment, and we can turn that apartment down the street into your future home. Many people found that strange, but housing was in short supply -- and affordable -- not affordable at some distance, and so, you know, we went from, you know, single-family houses versus the rental apartments to this category called condos. Another obstacle were location, environmental issues; there are places that, you know, had we been able to build housing, that might have moderated price, increases but that affordable housing was not built-- there are transportation issues, you know, far away, bad location, not near jobs. And then we sort of lost our will to have national housing policy to counteract these strategies, starting in the 1980's. I think the Reagan administration basically felt that housing was not something that the federal government ought to deal with, and so while in a different generation, we might have addressed some of these problems quite dramatically, for the 1980's through about 1992 or 1993, we basically had no housing policy, other than the effort on the part of cities and advocates and public policy people to preserve the elements of housing policy that survived from the previous generation. Congress would routinely overrule the Reagan administration's efforts at dismantling the system, but they were always significantly short of successful. So over time, the pieces fell away.

INTERVIEWER: Is there a particular contribution you feel you've been able to make in the field?

CLAY: I think other people have to answer the question of what my contributions have been, but where I've tried to contribute is in bringing some knowledge and some clarity to what was happening and to how practitioners, our own students, would be effective in that environment. I tried to help people understand in the early 1990's that that system we had built had pretty much eroded, and that we were not only seeing the evolution that led to housing but we were creating homelessness. And I've tried to bring a some clarity to racial discrimination and community building. And then in organizations in which I participated, I hope I have made some contribution.

INTERVIEWER: Is some of that contribution connected to the National Commission policy recommendations that became part of that Housing Act of 1990?

CLAY: Yeah. I think the study I did in 1987 that sort of percolated into the Housing Act of, I believe, 1990 or something like that, where I think Congress really did tried to reclaim some of the responsibility for what was happening with respect to housing policy. So it was a fortuitous coming together of a piece of work and an opportunity to have some influence in the way legislation was written. So an organization emerged out of that -- we had non-profits before but we did not have non-profits that moved directly into the area of preservation of affordable housing, and I think that's one of the things that I'm pleased to have been a part of. In fact, I joined the founding board, and I'm going to get the dates wrong, probably by 1994, and I've just gone emeritus.

INTERVIEWER: Congratulations. For a minute I wanted to ask about the books that you've written. What is it that you needed to say about urban studies or housing policy that prompted you to write these books?

CLAY: Well, the first book was the one that focused on neighborhood gentrification and incumbent upgrading, and I think, I tried to make two big points there. One was that what we had as a paradigm in the field: that neighborhoods decline, and you know, proverbially just rot away or bulldoze--that that doesn't have to happen; that neighborhoods can be reborn. They can be reborn because the original architectural social class role is reclaimed, as occurred with gentrification, or it can be reborn because resources become available to working class families to reclaim the neighborhood and rebuild it to strengthen the market and to improve physical quality. And it was my goal in that book to make both of those points-- to make it clear that you don't need, you know, heart surgeons with extra cash to come in and fix up an old house; that you can have the sons and daughters of long-term residents of the neighborhood come in. The latter group will need a bit more help than the surgeon with extra cash, but that can be done. Other works that I did were aimed at trying to point out that a combination of those barriers that I mentioned earlier related to affordability, changes in the financing environment and the regulatory environment, were all combining to contribute to the homeless problem: homeless problem in the sense of the supply of affordable housing, low cost housing, was eroding, and that that's something that we needed to focus on rather than focus on the macro issues, because the Republicans and the Reagan administration had abandoned housing policy in favor of macro strategies aimed at, you know, monetary policy and fiscal policy, not housing policy or jobs policy or health policy, or any of those other issues. And so that work was aimed at trying to pull together the information to document that what we had held dear--namely access, affordability-- were at risk and seriously address.

I learned one other thing, which is that it's best to write your own communications, because in that study, and I remember it distinctly, it was about to be released, and someone sent me a draft -- a press release -- and there was one phrase in there that I overlooked, and it represented a misrepresentation of what I said in the study--not a serious misrepresentation, but a nuance-- and I don't recall exactly what it was, but they essentially pulled a number, an irrelevant number and placed it with my estimation that we were losing housing. So somehow they publicized that five million houses were being lost, and I never said that. I said we were losing the stock; but five million was never a number that was either correct or that I put in the study. So for a good 1/3 of the communications with the press, it was to straighten out that misperception. Valuable lesson.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. Yes. Let me re-focus back to MIT, because I have a lot to ask you about that. How about if we start with the School of Architecture and Planning. What role do you see this school having in the MIT campus at large?

CLAY: The role of the School of Architecture and Planning has evolved over the period when I was here. When I came as a student, my world was the Department of Urban Studies and Planning and the Department of Political Science. The Department of Political Science, at the time, had a number of faculty members, Alan Altshuler the most prominent, who were interested in urban politics and international politics and collaborated with our faculty, cross-listed courses, students moved back and forth in terms of participating in seminars and the like. So my world was Building Seven and Building E-52, and I didn't much notice what went on in between.

That changed a little bit as the years evolved; there are a couple of faculty members in economics, who had a similar connection to the department that would evolve shortly after. Students who were interested in transportation would soon develop a relationship with civil and environmental -- of course, just called civil engineering at the time. As the environmental issues emerged in the late 1970's, that expanded the network a little bit more, and it wasn't until, I would say, about 1990, and I remember this because we had a strategic plan in the department that, I think, was dated 1992, where there was the explicit question and the challenge from the provost, how the department would join forces, collaborate more broadly, so that we would participate in the major issues that developed at MIT, in which the department had some interest.

Environmental would be the easiest to illustrate in that regard, because over the period since the late 1970's probably a dozen departments had a significant role in the environmental research and education at MIT. No school was not included in that, and our school, you know, played a significant role. The next challenge was to go beyond teaching and sort of minimal research engagement to a much more substantial engagement, and I think that has been -- that has occurred to a much more substantial degree in the last six or eight years. I think students have been ahead of the faculty on this; students would go to classes and make connections that we did not recognize in the curriculum or in faculty efforts. For example, when I was a student I didn't do it, but a number of my peers took courses at the Sloan School. They identified a number of faculty there who were interested in organizational behavior, for example, and we had a regular group of students who would go to Sloan for that purpose. And of course, there were those who had a more quantitative background and who would go deeply into infrastructure and transportation courses in civil engineering. I think there's much more of an institutional department-faculty leadership in making these connections now than has ever existed in the past.

INTERVIEWER: The change has been to have a much more multi-disciplinary approach to urban studies?

CLAY: Well, I think the basic shift has been to move into the way MIT operates generally, which is you define a problem, you sharpen the questions, and then you bring to bear all of the disciplines and departments and people who can make a contribution to that. Again, environmental is the easiest to illustrate, but if we get into areas of economic development, then the obvious likely people to collaborate on such projects would be urban studies, economics, and Sloan. There have always been small personal connections at that level, but to organize courses and other kinds of initiatives is of more recent tenure.

INTERVIEWER: Do you see that as a particular role that the school has either nationally or internationally?

CLAY: I think the international -- the role the school has perceived of itself has been developed largely independent of relation to other parts of MIT, so in the international area, for example, the school for as long as I can remember, is the leading program in international development. So when it came to metropolitan planning, regional planning, our close peers were, you know, UCLA, Berkeley, Cornell, at one point; but, you know, we were the leaders. We had big projects and several countries around the world, in South America and Africa and the Middle East for many years. And we did that and, you know, there are stories of urban studies faculty sort of meeting, you know, civil engineering faculty in the airport in Cairo. They were there working on the same region, but on different projects. I think now they're more likely to be working on the same team.

INTERVIEWER: Can we talk a little about your sort of progression at MIT from, you know, professor, department head, associate provost, assistant director of the Joint Center for Urban Studies? Can you just sort of tell me the story of that evolution?

CLAY: I'm probably not able to tell a story of the evolution, but let me just affirm that those were the steps I took. I think the basic explanation is that I probably have a, you know, a dna element, called service, and saying yes. I tend to like, in situations where I'm present, to try to make a contribution, and I think I do it in a way that -- I offer myself in a way that's appealing to some people, and MIT has been a place, still is a place, that looks for leadership among -- tends to look around the table for it's next academic leaders and departments and schools and programs, and so forth. So I guess I was -- once I got around the table -- that I would sort of be in line for the things that would occur. In my department, for example, in the 77 years of the department, this last transition is the first time we've gone outside the department for a leader. And that's not unlike many other departments at MIT, so it's not surprising that I would not, sort of, be in line for something. I think if I were to try to describe the mentoring process, it is that there are opportunities in the department, progressively more challenging opportunities or opportunities that had more responsibility, in that if you got on that path and you didn't screw up, you moved up.

INTERVIEWER: But you must have asked the right questions along the way? So I have this note here, the definition of a chancellor, and it's so broad. It says the chancellor has oversight responsibility for graduate and undergraduate education at MIT, student life and student services, oversight of many of the Institute's large scale international partnerships and other initiatives. What do you really do?

CLAY: Well, the definition of the chancellor's role, I think it's fair to say, that MIT has, you know, two, as opposed to just one, senior academic officers, and the chancellor's role is principally activities that relate to education of students, and the dean's and the units related to that, report to the chancellor. That's the simplest definition of the job that I have, that the job Larry Bacow had before me, and that Paul Gray had before that. All those other things you mentioned turn out to be areas that represented particular opportunities. I did have some responsibilities for international oversight when I was associate provost, so that responsibility sort of followed me around the corner. They have since been re-assigned to Phil Curry who's associate provost, but I still have my fingers in a few things, and it's sort of hard to disentangle, because many of these are relationships, not just jobs, and they take more time depending on, you know, where they are, and most of them are fairly mature, so they take a lot less time.

But I think the origin of the current definition of the role really goes back to 1998, when Chuck Vest received a report from the task force on student life and committed MIT to greatly changing the way the students experienced MIT, and there was a lot to be done, and he wanted to have someone senior whose job it was to make those changes. At that time we had a dean for undergraduate education and student life, and we decided, he decided, that those positions ought to be split: that we should have a dean for undergraduate education and a dean for student life, and that there was a very long agenda for each of them; and it's been my responsibility and Larry Bacow's before that to work through that long agenda.

INTERVIEWER: So let's talk about what student life was like before that report came out that prompted the commitment to make a change. What was identified as needing to be improved?

CLAY: The changes that the task force proposed, that the faculty adopted and that Chuck wanted to implement was a very long list, and let me just illustrate it, I don't want to suggest that I'm giving you the whole list. They range from a residence system in which the focus was on minimal, to put it simply, adult supervision. We'd had a system where the dormitories were buildings that students lived; there were housemasters that gave a variety of oversight, based on their disposition and the physical characteristics of the building, and the historic culture of the building. But you couldn't say that there was an approach to student life. We had fraternities that were very strong in the sense that the best of them provided an invaluable environment to their students, in fact, I think it would be fair to say, that the best description of the experience of being a student at MIT often was associated with being in some of the fraternities, rather than living in the dorm, though there were exceptions there. We had a judgment, a conclusion about the pace and pressure that MIT was a hard, rough, unfriendly place; that students were on their own; that faculty didn't wander across Mass. Avenue; that the western part of the campus was a refuge that students would go to at night to get away from the "Institute," which was on the other side of Massachusetts Avenue. We didn't have a lot of programs, but there were a lot of activities. So it was very easy to set up a, you know, juggling club, but there wasn't a notion about where would they practice and how would they be a part of the National Juggling Association. We had athletics in which lots of students participated, much higher than most institutions, but we had very, very marginal facilities. We had some great coaches, but we had other sports that were under-invested in, and we had the perception that this was a rough place to survive, and while the statistics did not support it, there was a sense that students were over-stressed and, you know, suicide rates were high and nobody cared. So that was the scenario, that was the image that people had. Some of those things were very true, and embarrassingly true; some of them were just perceptions. Faculty really did care about student life, and some dormitories had wonderful cultures the alumni now reflect on, but we weren't getting the message across. In some cases we were under-performing, and in some places there was a gem that wasn't polished or held up for its true value, and that's been the challenge: to change all of those things in the last decade. And 1998 was 10 years ago.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me about the changes that have taken place.

CLAY: Well, I think some fraternities have not made it through this period. I think the system is stronger now than it has been. I think we have invested a great deal in supporting this system, and supporting it through a transition that involved having freshman live on campus, as opposed to the first week of a student's experience be carrying a suitcase around campus, looking for a place to live. I think we've created, with the strong support of alumni, a set of facilities that much more honor the interests that students have and the passion they bring to this campus about activities, whether it's athletics or music. I think we have programs now that put resources to support what we think students ought to have as an experience, whether it's theatre or affinity groups. I think we have a great deal more invested in community health, mental health, and I believe the housing experience is more uniformly positive than it was believed then. We have a housemaster system and GRT and residence life program staff who support student initiatives as well as provide a framework, an infrastructure, for student activities. I believe we have more support for student leadership development, because the underlying point about all of these is that there is a great expectation that students would take responsibility for major elements of this community. There are no faculty supervisors in fraternity houses, for example, they are enterprises run by students. And so we've given a lot more attention to student leadership development, and this has been joined with a greater attention to more active learning on the academic side, and I believe lots more students develop a voice and a sense about their own responsibility for taking action. That is also a definition for entrepreneurship, which, I think, has also emerged powerfully in the same period.

INTERVIEWER: So in this sort of journey from going where the student life -- how it was evaluated 10 years ago and where it is now -- how far along is MIT in creating a more , hospitable seems too strong, but a more positive student life experience?

CLAY: I think the efforts that we've taken over the last 10 years have been well received by students. We do surveys, and I'd say we've made great progress in every area, probably the area where we've made the least progresses is in dining, and I want to say a word about that, because as we build dormitories -- going back to before 1950, MIT was largely a commuter institution. students, if they were lucky, you know, lived in fraternities and had a great life, but otherwise, they were in rooming houses and scattered around the area. So as we built dorms, we had two large cafeterias, and students ate in those, and as we built more and more dorms, we became less systematic in how we addressed dining. So if you look at our facilities, we have some dormitories -- the oldest ones have no dining facility, no kitchens. We have some later ones that have kitchens; we have some converted buildings that have apartment-like rooms, so there are kitchens, full kitchens; then in all of the dorms built since the late 1970's, early 1980's, we have a dining facility. So you have these three parts of the system, and we have, say, 4,000 undergraduates. Roughly 40 percent of them live in fraternities that have their own dining arrangements. So for roughly 2,000 students, we have this hodgepodge, and it's not an environment where you could imagine where students would dine, unless they happen to live in one of the few places, one of the three or four places where there is a one meal a day preferred dining plan. That's not where we ought to be.

We are still working on that particular problem, and it's going to be challenging to solve, because we built up an infrastructure around it that really has sort of grown up. So we were talking about, sort of, what might happen -- what should happen over the next 25 years or some such period. I think we need to work with students on that, and I think we need to allow aspects of the MIT culture to be re-invented to address this, and that I should not, having developed views at an earlier time, impose those on current and future students. But let me just describe some of the choices that I think are implicit in where we ought to go. If we were to take dining, which we were discussing a moment ago, if I had to say what my preference would be, it is that dining, that is, sitting down with someone else most of the time to have your meals would be the preferred thing. This comes from my experience where, for example, I always ate three meals a day sitting down. When I was a freshman, it was with my roommate, who was a junior, and I probably got the best orientation to college in going to breakfast with my roommate every morning.

I don't think our students necessarily want to go to breakfast at eight o'clock in the morning, but maybe they could go could have the same experience at lunch or dinner. I also had different circles of friends, and the way I routinely engaged circles of friends were to have meals. You know I ate -- the snack I had at 10 o'clock was with a different group of people than the dinner I had at six o'clock, and I think that from my point of view dining is really a social occasion. You know, the food is one thing, and you know, you want to have good food, but really it is a social experience; it's an important experience; and it will always be an important experience--in a relationship, on a job, in building connections with people. Even at my advanced age, when I want to make some progress in that area, I generally think about having lunch or dinner or something. I don't think about standing, on the whole, munching. I don't think our students see it that way; that is not the world in which they have grown up, and so, for me to impose that on them now, seems to them strange and objectionable, but that's my view. I think we also have to figure out how to deal with the diversity that's built into this community.

I think universities have three opportunities to advance students in this area. The first is an understanding the analytics of our diversity; universities can do a very good job at that. Second, to have the university as an institution, a laboratory for understanding group, international, racial, cultural, gender dynamics, and to practice that in the organizations and settings in which they are, including where they live. And then third, the journey from 18 to 22 is really a long journey, it's a very important journey, and part of it ought to be having students become comfortable in their skin. So again, if I were to take my own bias, it would be that before you can become comfortable, you first have to be challenged or even made uncomfortable, so that you can generate the questions and develop a point of view and develop relationships and practice those, and then emerge with a voice and with some confidence that you can go out in the world and meet and live and work and deal with anybody. The students who graduate today will not necessarily be going back to Kansas; they may be going to Kuwait. They won't necessarily be going to Chicago, they could be going to China, and they should feel as comfortable in going to China from Kansas as going to Chicago from Kansas, and I think universities have to deal with that and the best indicator from my point of view would be that students have some confidence that they can actually do that.

INTERVIEWER: And how do you do that?

CLAY: Well, I think we have to take them to China. I don't think there's any substitute for that. We currently have international opportunities for about 1/4 of our students; I think we can double that. I don't think we need it to go to 100 percent, but I think we need to get well above 25 percent.

INTERVIEWER: It is true that at a lot of schools, study abroad has become a much bigger element of the educational process than certainly when you and I were in school, where it was sort of an -- it was an unusual thing.

CLAY: Yeah, my international experience was a weekend in Toronto in February. It was truly international but --

INTERVIEWER: At my son's school, 60 percent go abroad.

CLAY: Let me just say that I don't think that our students will ever go abroad in the traditional way. That is, our students are not going to say, gee I'm really interested in Italian sculpture, so I'm going to spend a year in Italy going around looking at sculpture. There would be one or two students who do that, but I don't think we are ever going to get out of single digits. What our students are anxious to do and will take the slightest opportunity to do, is to pursue their passion, whatever it is, and it just happens to be that that will lead them to Italy or China or Brazil. We have faculty, for example, who do research projects all over the world, so one easy way to advance students global experience is to create opportunities for those students to go to Brazil to work with the faculty, just as they work with that same faculty member here on campus. Students are very interested in service opportunities. They're interested in doing things that will solve real problems, and there are real problems all over the world, and we should make it possible for them to go there; so they go to Ecuador, they have nothing in particular about Ecuador as a place of interest, but that's the opportunity to try out something new, and I think we should put as many of those opportunities in the way of students as we can, and I have no doubt that students will line up to take them.

INTERVIEWER: Are there any other big goals that you think or big changes that are planned or need to take place?

CLAY: I think this journey, this transformation that students have to go through is probably the biggest one. I think we invest a lot in infrastructure and activities in programs, but nothing beats the human experience and the opportunity to explore, and anything we can do there-- whether it's in music or the sciences or engineering or architecture or planning or development-- those become transformational experiences. I say this both as a faculty member and as a father. You send someone to a place that makes them slightly uncomfortable; it forces them to ask different questions; it forces them to listen to what they say and listen to what they hear. You force them to encounter people who look at the same information and come to a different conclusion and have some basis for why that conclusion is reasonable. If we can force our students into situations like that, whether they're there in China or New Orleans, we will put them through the transformation that will make their educational experience more meaningful than an extra course or two.

INTERVIEWER: And you're embarking on the Campaign for Students?

CLAY: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Is that, why don't you describe what that is.

CLAY: Well the Campaign for Students is an effort to raise \$500 million dollars, 2/3 of which, is for financial aid for undergraduate scholarships and graduate fellowships. The other 1/3 is to support student learning and student life initiatives. The aim is basically to secure the access to MIT that is part of our tradition; we admit students without regard to their family resources, admit them basically on whether they fit MIT, and then we meet the need that they bring with them from their background. Our alumni and friends have been very generous in the past, and most of the commitment is endowed, but a good fraction of it is not, and the coming years will raise the need even greater and the challenge to secure the future of this commitment is even more necessary than it has been in the past, and this is true for -- and I want emphasize this -- this is true for both undergraduates and graduate students. So that's Part One. The other part is when, as we've talked about, international experiences, as we talked about, more active ways of learning. new facilities to support different ways that faculty teach and different ways students learn, to upgrade some of our facilities and to strengthen and secure our programs: those are the things that we have as goals for the campaign.

Now we could go through some illustrations, and I'll just offer one. About 20 years ago, we started a public service center; it was started as a way to connect students to tutoring opportunities and other service opportunities that existed in the area and on campus. But what has emerged over the 20 years is that there many faculty who want to tie into their teaching opportunities to make the world around us-- and sometimes that world really is halfway around the world--but to tie in real life problems and service opportunities with learning opportunities, and we want to do that and they want to do that in a way that makes for no barriers between a student's opportunity to participate in that educational opportunity and the student's own other needs. So, for example, if there's an opportunity in another country to work during the summer. there is the cost of having that student go to wherever it is to do the service, but for 70 percent of our students, the ones who have financial need, there's also the need to work during the summer. So to give the student the educational opportunity, we have to meet not only the cost of that opportunity, but the cost of the summer missed earnings that would occur. Now what do we get out of that? One, we get passionate students having an outlet for passion, teaching faculty having places where they can teach a practice oriented on an applied subject, a visibility for MIT, in a world where talent really is the coin of the realm, and a refreshed education. The project in 2008 won't be the same as the project, in 2009, and the opportunities for cross-learning between freshmen and sophomores and sophomores and juniors and the like, will be endless.

INTERVIEWER: I have some general questions about -- you know you're sort of unique, you know in that you have been at MIT your entire career, nearly.

CLAY: There are a lot of people like that, actually.

INTERVIEWER: How have you seen MIT change in the time that you've been here.

CLAY: Over the years I've been here, there have been a number of changes. I think we've become a more self-conscious institution. There was an MIT that was unwilling to talk about its connection to the world, even though they were as active in addressing great problems in the world, as much then as we are now, but they didn't talk about it then. I think now we think there is a great deal of value in talking about what we do, in generating a greater sense of public understanding of science, an appreciation for the value of this information getting to the public--the general public, the policy public, the economic public. I think we've had a change in the physical expectations we have of the place. We used to be quite accepting of a bit of grunginess and grayness and dullness, and in deference to sophisticated equipment and machinery and laboratories. And I think now we understand that people need an environment in which to work, whether it's an office or a laboratory, that really honors the fact that they are making a major commitment to this place, and the place needs to support them in terms of light and air conditioning and room and fixtures and services. It doesn't rule out tinkering, but a lot less tinkering now is necessary, and the tinkering that should occur should be about how you're building something to actually do a job, rather than how you, sort of, protect your office from the afternoon sun, so that you can work during July, which I remember when I was a graduate student. I had a great office, but it was hard to be there after about two o'clock in the summer.

INTERVIEWER: And that makes a real impact on work?

CLAY: Yes, because we can now work all summer, all day. We don't have to let the staff go at three o'clock, because it's unbearable, which is an interesting climatic impact, because if you could identify one thing that allowed to south to rise again, I suspect it would be the invention of air conditioning: people can work inside on very sophisticated things all day. When I was growing up, you know, it just got hot, and you didn't want to do a whole lot during the summer, and some things just became very difficult to do when you couldn't attract people who wanted to suffer the heat.

INTERVIEWER: As you've become part of the administration, what's been the attraction to, sort of, staying in that part of academia?

CLAY: Well, the willingness to go from one position to the next and to remain in the administration is really refreshed by the changing opportunities and the changing challenges that are available, so the job in 2008 is nothing like the job was in 2002, and all of the things I've talked about give you some clue about how things have changed, but they are not boring, and they don't become stale. They become more challenging or interesting or flexible or -- unique opportunities pop up that you couldn't plan for or imagine sometimes.

INTERVIEWER: It's clearly worth the less time for your own scholarly pursuits and less time in the classroom and --

CLAY: Yeah, because the arena that you are in changes. This is only the third year that I have not taught; and that's because the work in the last three years has involved a great deal more travel, over which I have less control, and I did not want to be one of those faculty members who needed a talking to from the department head or the dean about missing classes and moving things around to fit your travel schedule, so I've had to give that up and I do miss it. But there's been an opportunity to engage a whole new set of people in our relationships outside of MIT that is interesting and challenging and exciting in its own way.

INTERVIEWER: Can you talk a little more about those external relationships, because that is part of your role as chancellor.

CLAY: Well, MIT has an opportunity to participate, initiate, support, partner, collaborate in a variety of ways, and that it's been my opportunity from time to time to represent MIT as those activities are developed, some time to represent in celebratory ways, and sometimes to simply be a participant, and in that situation, I've had the opportunity to meet alumni and friends in places all around the world. Just to give you an illustration, we have a program in Portugal, and this program was developed by the Portuguese government in their attempt to move their investment and research and development -- basically triple it over a decade -- and they wanted to do this by engaging our faculty in a research collaboration with faculty in different institutions in Portugal. So those discussions happened over a period where we tested whether the relationship could be consummated on that basis, who it is among our faculty who would be interested, who their colleagues would be on the Portuguese side, what kind of institutional arrangements are necessary, and then we came to a view that this could work. Well, once that commitment was made, then this became a major initiative of the Portuguese government. Now -- and you could imagine that -- this looks a lot bigger there than it does here. We have, you know, thousands of universities, and universities aren't necessarily major partners in what our government considers to be major initiatives. So being a part of that from the initial conversation, you know, would you all sign this agreement day after tomorrow, to going and working out the nitty-gritty problems of collaboration, long distance involving what now have been more than 40 faculty and several institutions in Portugal. That's interesting and challenging and exciting, and it provides our faculty with a set of research and collaborative opportunities, which we could not have imagined a decade ago.

INTERVIEWER: Is your background useful in those sorts of enterprises, your urban studies background?

CLAY: The specifics of my background and not necessarily valuable; I don't think it really matters what your background is. I think what is required is a clarity about our institutional interests, or at least some of what our institutional interests are, a willingness to listen, and to negotiate in the soft sense-- because I think -- I don't want to say it negotiation in the hard sense -- of what you would, you know, going over a minor words and IP policy and payment procedures and tax issues, and that sort of thing. Others can do that far better than I ever could, but it is about creating an environment where faculty and our staff can be productive, that they will feel comfortable; they will find the collaborative opportunities attractive; that the brand of MIT is protected; and that there are mechanisms for engaging different kinds of faculty; and to making sure that there is something there that we can be comfortable with over the life the contract. I think I have the patience to work on answering all those questions simultaneously.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that your experience -- you've sort of grown up at MIT and experienced it as a graduate student and professor and administrator -- is that an asset, and do you ever find it a liability?

CLAY: I think it's an asset. I don't find it a liability; sometimes other people do. They somehow think that if you're an administrator, you're some kind of weird character that's somewhat less pure than a faculty member who isn't troubled by having to answer these questions. I don't feel that way; I think I have enough friends who don't feel that way. So I'm not troubled by that feeling, except when it does get in the way and where I try to remind people that I am a faculty member and one day, I will be a faculty member again, and that, you know, where I go in those situations is to what's the best thing for the institution. It's not how I feel, how you feel, it's what's the best thing for the institution?

INTERVIEWER: What do you think is MIT's role? Does it have a world role?

CLAY: Well, I think we are the leading science and technology focused institution in the world. I don't say that in any bragging kind of way, but I think that is our brand; and I think when you're the leader, then you do have some responsibilities. You have a responsibility to protect that reputation; you have a responsibility to give back--that is, to reach out to students who might not think they can come here and tell them that, yes you can, if this is the right place in terms of your abilities and interest. We have an obligation to reach out for the talent that would honor the contributions that those students bring. We have an obligation to make sure we have an environment that supports the best people wanting to be here; and I think we have an opportunity to communicate to the public that has been so generous in our reaching this status and that we will count on to maintain the status. I think we have an obligation to carry that leadership around the world, sometimes doing things which might not in the first instance appear to be selfishly beneficial to us, but would be beneficial for the large interest of science and technology and education.

INTERVIEWER: How well do you think MIT is doing that responsibility, in meeting those obligations?

CLAY: I think we've historically done a very good job at it; I think the way the challenge is framed would be different in each generation. I think some of what I just described can be found in the words of MIT leaders going back generations, but they probably weren't as focused on a global agenda as the current faculty and administration are. I think their notion of outreach was for a much narrower framing of the MIT student than we have today. I think they probably were not as aggressive about diversity as we are today, and I think they probably had a narrow vision of what it is you that you integrate than we have today. Science and technology focus did not always include outreach to architectural planning or management or politics. I think there's a greater appreciation of that today.

INTERVIEWER: You just mentioned the diversity. Have you seen the student body change substantially in the time you've been here, and I just don't mean it's diversity--the sort of personality of the student body, has that changed?

CLAY: In my view it has, but not going to try to characterize the personality of students; you get into great trouble with that, because you're, sort of, loading on your own biases and images and experiences, in ways that will sound to almost anybody who looks at this tape as sort of weird and -- how is he talking about that? But let me just share a couple things. In my own generation I think we were probably, and I'm speaking of my own educational experience, we had a far greater sense of possibilities. I don't ever recall in college worrying about whether I would have a job. I don't think that ever crossed my mind. The issue was which job did I want to have? That crossed my mind a lot, and I won't, say I worried about it, but I certainly talked to people about it, and I tried different things, and I read about, you know, different kinds of public-oriented careers, and I just figured that once I decide which one I wanted, it'd be there, and we had economic recessions, you know.

There was a Recession in my sophomore and junior year of college; I noticed it, but I figured that, you know, when I'm ready for a job there will be one. I think our students now don't have the luxury of that kind of carefree thinking about their own personal future; it's not their fault. I think they're in a world that seems -- has been much less hopeful in the way it has presented opportunity than I grew up with. I grew up believing that I would, of course, get a job, and life for me would be better than my parents, and I don't think that had anything to do with where I lived there or who I was, I think that was the way most parents and most of students felt. I don't think we could say to a 17 year-old now, that your life's going to be, in measurable economic terms, that your life is going to be better than your parents. That may or may not be true. There will be downward mobility, and students worry about that, and it's probably a useful worry.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, it's very -- it's sad.

CLAY: And it is sad, and it works its way out into the way students view how they choose their major, how they spend their summer. Parents are on them. You know, you know you must be an x and not a y. My parents never cared what I majored in, they just wanted to make sure I, you know, I had the get-up-and-go to work, and I did, and they didn't worry. And some parents don't worry; their students worry; and when they're not worrying on the same page, it's a source of stress for students.

INTERVIEWER: When you first came here -- so did you first come here in the 1960's?

CLAY: 1968.

INTERVIEWER: 1968. This institution must have been very male and very white. Has race played some role in -- over the years has it been an issue for you at all?

CLAY: It has been an issue; it's always an issue; and I think, if I were to say it's not an issue, my wife and daughter would probably exercise their healthcare proxy and haul me off someplace, at least I hope they would.

INTERVIEWER: The only thing I would like you to do, is if you could mention race, because you started out by saying it's been --

CLAY: Oh, Okay. I think race has always been an issue with me, and I expect it always will be. I joke with some of my friends that, you know, we'll probably be debating over how many slices of bacon we get at home in future years, and I don't say that in a sad way, I think notwithstanding this recent election, we do have race as an issue, and I don't expect it to go away. I'm very, very delighted with the great progress that's been made, and I could go through all kinds of steps, all kinds of indications of upward progress that we've made in my time at MIT and in other places. I think what I have benefited from was growing up in an area where -- in an era where it was always important to us to be comfortable with who we are, and I see some evidence that young people today aren't as clear about that, or as clear as I think I was at their age--now again, that could be my bias-- but I remember from the earliest times. lessons about how to deal with race. Some of those lessons were lessons that I would tell young people now; and others were lessons that were wrong, and I would not tell young people now, but it was always something that was the subject of, sort of, conscious thinking and planning, encouragement to move forward, to take risks, to step outside, to get advice, to look for role models, to filter advice through a number of screens, not just one; that it's not just race, but other things: gender and where you come from and how you sound, and, you know, the particular style of engagement with people, things like that.

If there's anything which I do regret now with young people is that there's probably a little -- a lot less of a sense that that's necessary. Adults, when I was growing up, found that was absolutely critical, and I can remember incidents where, you know, I would get a lecture from every aunt and every uncle about how I should interpret and behave on a particular matter that had come up in the news or in the neighborhood, and so forth. And so I, sort of, entered adulthood, figuring that this was something I had to deal with, and I still do, and that's certainly what I communicate to young people that I have the chance to talk to, but I do know that many of these young people didn't grow up that way and the saddest situation is that when kids grow up being told that, you know, the world is open; everything is possible; racism is gone; and people look at you as a person, and they believe that, and then come up to a situation inevitably where that's not the case. Those are the students I worry about, not the students who have the kinds of experiences we've all had -- that I've had over my lifetime -- and that you absorb and deal with and move on.

INTERVIEWER: Are there any examples you could give me -- you know, maybe -- how race might have been an issue in the earlier years that you were here compared to how it would be handled now?

CLAY: I think there's now much more of a consciousness about mentoring -- this is on the matter of how we're dealing with race in the past at MIT versus now. We now have mentoring, and I think, and this is not just for minority faculty, but for all faculty, and we have long, painful discussions about how to mentor, whether we should mentor, whether someone was not mentored properly, et cetera et cetera. And I don't ever recall the word mentoring in the first x years of my life on the faculty. What I was told was that you should seek advice. I was told that when I was in high school, that if you have a question about what something means or about how you do something, all what something you saw means, or what a particular kind of behavior means, I was told that you should ask about it, and that you should identify people whom you trust and to whom you can go to and talk. Now when I was in college, those people were my peers. In fact, you know, one of my meals on any given day would be with other black students, and we basically in at least 1/2 the conversation were -- sort of, sharing our experiences that day and what they meant. And we all -- sort of jokingly -- because think about it, because at some point, the question would start out, am I crazy or what? And then we would describe an experience, and then our peers, upper class peers would, you know, give their observation. And then we would sit and decide what it meant.

And that's been my experience through life; and it's my experience today, and whether it's mentoring -- you call it mentoring or something else -- I've always had a sense that I need advice, that I need to get as much advice as I can, and that I'm responsible for the decisions I make and the steps I take. If people get to college and don't have that perspective, I think they're missing something, and they're missing an opportunity for engaging with people that, you know, builds the kinds of relationships that I've enjoyed over my years. And this is not just in, you know, sort of, career development, but even in a kind of car I buy or, you know, how I advise, you know, kids on choosing college or, you know, whether to work in, you know, City Hall or in the public sector or, you know, the difference between firm A and firm B. I think it's all the same; it's a matter of you don't know everything. What are the questions, and who do you go to for advice so that you can make a good decision.

INTERVIEWER: What's interesting to me in what you just described is early on -- the way that you grew up or the sort of responsibility was on you to seek out the advice, and now there see, to be discussions among faculty members that they have a responsibility to mentor, so that more of the responsibility is on the faculty member? So that's --

CLAY: Well this is -- I'm glad you raised the point about where the responsibility lies, whether the young person, young faculty member should go out and seek advice, or whether their older peers should have the obligation to give advice -- I think both have to be true. But part of my background says that I have to get advice, because keep in mind that I grew up in the rural south in the 1950s, and nobody in my family had ever been to university, much less MIT, and so, for me nearly every experience was a new experience. I had no prior knowledge, no handbook that I could read to figure out how I would act going to college. So in going to college I had the brother of a friend of mine who walked the path that I would walk. Of course, I went to him and asked him every question, including a lot a dumb questions, and I think I learned a lot. I can't imagine going thinking that I knew what it meant to be a freshman in college. I had no idea.

INTERVIEWER: No one in your family to ask.

CLAY: No one in my family to ask, but they were supportive of whatever I did, including things that I might do that would be counterproductive, not stupid or criminal or anything like that, but if I thought I should do x, they said, well that sounds like a good thing to do. They didn't have any way of knowing.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. In your years here, are there any particular stories that stand out about MIT, any particular turning points or things that have happened to you, that you think: that's a real MIT story?

CLAY: There have always been people at MIT, especially less true -- less obvious in recent years than in early years -- there have always been people at MIT who would be champions, that is, people who had a sense that something should happen, and that they would make it happen, and I learned --

INTERVIEWER: -- some examples of who stands out in your mind --

CLAY: Well, there was a time when I came where the number of black students at MIT was very small. There were a group of faculty at the time, some became administrators, who wanted to change this, and wanted to change it in a substantial way. Paul Gray was among those groups of people, and they proceeded to array their talents and passions in a way to make it happen. I don't ever remember a faculty vote on what it is they were doing; I don't remember any grand announcements about what they were doing; but I do remember, daily, hearing about things that were happening that they were associated with that made a difference, sometimes in a major way.

I had a department head when I joined the faculty, who by our standards was not a very democratic person. I don't remember going to a faculty meeting and ever seeing a vote. Whenever an idea came up, he would allow discussion; he would just sit and sort of put his hand on his chin, and then say I'm going to talk to a few key people, and we'll see where we go from here. Now I didn't have any idea, as a junior faculty member, what that meant. I would later understand what it meant: a particular way of leading, which is you don't want to leave anybody behind, you don't want to isolate or marginalize anyone, but you sometimes need to get a few people to adjust their attitude or position or opposition in order for the larger view -- sometimes the majority view, sometimes it's not the majority view -- but to go ahead. Whereas if he had voted, or if he put everything to a vote, some very good ideas would have been voted down. As it turned out, some very good ideas moved ahead, I'm sure, without explicit majority support. Now I'm not sure whether -- when I do that -- that comes off as anti-democratic or good leadership; but I think that, as a practical matter, in an institution when you are trying to make change, you have to be someone who works quietly to create a path forward that may not be something that anybody would vote for, and sometimes it may even be something you would not want to put to a vote.

INTERVIEWER: You should offer that advice to the president-elect.

CLAY: He knows it, I'm sure he knows it. He exercised this kind of leadership when he was a Harvard law student, was president of the Law Review at a very contentious time at Harvard Law and among students -- sort of moving forward without giving too many people an opportunity a roadblock.

INTERVIEWER: Are there any other famous colleagues that you've worked with here?

CLAY: Well I would rather talk about the infamous colleagues.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

CLAY: I've had a number of colleagues who I would never adopt their style; their style is not my style. Even if I thought what they're doing was effective, I would not be credible doing it, and so I wouldn't copy it; but I do understand that in an institution like a university, you do have different ways of doing things, different styles, and if there's anything that I'm reasonably comfortable with, it's accepting that there are some styles that are effective that I don't particularly like. This is irrespective of whether I like the person, but some styles that I don't like, but I realize that they're effective, and I could imagine myself supporting someone in a style that would not be my style. And you know, many of these are very good people. Sometimes it was hard for some of my friends to understand, how could you side with this guy? And I said, well we're trying to do the same thing. I don't like his style, but I like what he's trying to do.

INTERVIEWER: John Silber is a good case in point from BU.

INTERVIEWER: Well, you use the case of John Silber. I wasn't at BU, so I didn't have to experience his style, but that's an illustration. I could never do some of the things that are alleged of him, but in 1971, BU was a pretty pathetic place, and he did build it into a great university, and I'm sure there are people who appreciate some of the things he did to make it a great university, but deplore the way he did it. And I understand that, and I've had some infamous friends. The issue is my daughter, is as class of 2007, in City Planning in the Master's program. One of the deals I made with my daughter, especially significant in the digital world, is that I don't talk about it, because it would ruin her life, and I promised when she was age 11, I wouldn't ruin her life. But I will say that she has many of the same passions for service that I had and had to overcome the fact that I was here. And I have lots of friends whose children have had to deal with that, and I was happy to walk in the basement for the first six weeks so I wouldn't bump into her.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have a perspective, you know, not of being a parent, you know, how you see the MIT experience as a parent?

CLAY: Well I don't talk about parenting, because there's a chance that I might be quoted, and I would ruin my daughter's life. But I do take a couple of points about it. I made a point earlier about transformation. I think that if I were to think about students I've known, young people I've known from, say over long periods, say from when they were small to as they go through college, what I take from watching them, including my own daughter, is the significance of the transformational experience. Many of these young people I know, I could not have predicted when they were eight or 10 or 12, what they would choose and the style that they would adopt by the time they become 20 or 25. How they made those choices, who influenced them in making those choices, what the various experiences they had meant to them, I don't fully understand. So, what I bring to my stewardship at MIT is the view that we should put in front of our young people as many transformational opportunities as possible, give them advice about how they should -- --about the questions they should ask, and then let them come to the answer. And I don't think when that has happened, too many students make bad decisions. They don't make permanent decisions as often as they used to and that's a good thing.

INTERVIEWER: Well it's not really the climate that they'll be working in anymore, where you can choose something and then stick with it for 40 years.

CLAY: Well Katrina was a tragic situation, and in some degrees, it could've been avoided -- or some degree of the severity could've been avoided. That said, it was also an opportunity for us at MIT to do service and to provide an object lesson in a variety of areas, including planning and ecology and political science and a host of other -- and history -- and of course, of other subjects. We had a number of generous alums who made resources available to support faculty and students in a number projects that meant that probably for a three-year period after Katrina, there was always an MIT team, either in New Orleans, working on a project or here working on something that they would take to New Orleans in the coming IEP or the coming summer break. I'd like to think that that experience will make all of those students, whether they were freshmen or graduate students, leave MIT with a great sense of clarity about the urgency of doing good work. I started out this comment by talking about avoidability. The situation in New Orleans was presaged several times prior to 2005. It was presaged in the way things were handled in the flood of 1927, which was not a hurricane but a perfect storm of very heavy snow, very early spring, and an extended rain that created a disaster in New Orleans in June of 1927. A lot of the lessons that were available to be learned about water systems, about levy development, and so forth, were not learned, and some of the responses were, in fact, bad decisions that made Katrina possible. There was a second storm in 1965, again major damage, clear object lessons, but a quick return to, well that's a 100-year storm, we can move on, we don't have to deal with it. And another set of decisions that were made that made Katrina worse than it had to be.

INTERVIEWER: People sometimes you don't learn.

CLAY: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: There's something else I remember I wanted to ask you about is the story of MIT on September 11th, because that was -- you were the one who was coordinating that response, were you not?

CLAY: Well, I was the only guy in town after September 11th, so there was the need to address a couple of questions at MIT, and I was happy that we were able to work on that. One was a sense of shock and tragedy, and in such situations, it is necessary to create some kind of event that would allow those expressions to be expressed in a community sort of way. So on the afternoon of September 11th, we have a Kresge Oval event, and then the next day a more formal community conversation on Killian Court. The second thing we had to do was, it became clear by early in the afternoon of September 11th, that the attack on the towers would be associated with Muslim terrorists, whoever they were, and there were beginning to be a sort of a sense of fear and anger directed in that direction -- in the direction of Muslims around the country. So part of the effort was to remind the community that we were an intentional community that had chosen each other, and that the relationships that existed so well on September 10th needed to be preserved. And it was very important on the afternoon of the 11th, to reach out to Muslim students, quite directly and quite substantially, for them to participate in the community activity, and that when we put together the panel of clergy, that we include a Muslim clergy as well. And I think we, unlike some other parts of the country, were able to make it through that very difficult period with our sense of community intact, and perhaps even reinforced.

INTERVIEWER: Is there anything else that we haven't talked about, thoughts you have about MIT in any of the roles that you've been in, thoughts about its future or its past or observations that you can share?

CLAY: I probably didn't realize at the time, when I came to visit in 1967, what it is that I found attractive. Certainly there were no glossy brochures, there was no recruiter, there was no one dangling a fellowship in my face, none of those things were true. But what was true was a sense of simplicity in relationships. People worked together because they shared a passion. The department was self-conscious about how it prepared its students and was willing and able to articulate that. It made sense to me. People were inviting others -- inviting, in the sense of wanting students to be a part of the activities. There was a sense that we were to make a difference in the world, and that we should prepare students professionally and in academic terms, to take leadership roles. This is all done without pretension, without a sense that we were entitled to this leadership role, but that we earn it, and in the phrase of an old ad, we have to earn it every day. It wasn't about who you are, but what you're doing, what you are working on, what you were trying to achieve, what question you were trying to answer. Those are the things that attracted me to MIT in 1967, and they remain true today.