

00:00 - 03:30 Introduction, background

Today is December 30th, 2011, and my name is Amy Stewart-Mailhiot, and I am on the campus of Oregon State University interviewing Pacific University alumni Dr. Lawrence Griggs.

Dr. Griggs, thank you for joining us. Can you please give us some background information and just tell me when and where you were born and where you grew up?

Okay, I was born in Meridian, Mississippi many years ago, and I grew up most of my years in Meridian, Mississippi. I moved around. My father was a Methodist minister. So during those years, a minister actually stayed at the church for two to three years and then moved to a different church. So I actually moved to Meridian, Mississippi, Birmingham, Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and after Tuscaloosa, Alabama, then I moved to the state of Washington, Tacoma, Washington.

What brought you to Tacoma, Washington?

Well, my mother actually raised her net view, and he actually was in the Air Force and those days called it Army Air Corps. And so he actually returned to the United States at Fort Lewis, Washington, and decided to stay in Tacoma. And he wanted my mother to come and move to Tacoma. So she and a brother and I moved to Tacoma when I was in the 10th grade of high school.

How was that transition coming from Meridian, Mississippi, or generally in the South to move into Tacoma?

It was a different experience because actually I moved from a segregated society to an integrated society, and it was, in many ways, was a complete shock. That's not so much the integration or the segregation, but in high school, when I was in high school or middle school, all my teachers looked like me. And so when I moved to Tacoma, that was a big difference.

I can imagine. So what did you do leading up to coming to PLU? Where did you graduate from high school?

Well actually I started at Lincoln. I lived on East Side of Tacoma. And so the students from East Side of Tacoma actually attended Lincoln High School. But my senior year I moved to Stadium High School, and I graduated from Stadium High School.

When I first moved to Tacoma, I actually had a friend that lived next door to me. And he had, it was a year ahead of me. But he had gone to Olympic Junior College and actually encouraged me to go to Olympic, which I

did, and started my college there, and stayed there two years. And then after leaving Olympic, I worked for a year, and then the following year I applied and was admitted to Pacific Lutheran.

04:47 - 11:01 Experience at PLU as a student

So what was it that attracted you to Pacific Lutheran, or was it just?

Well, a couple of things. One, I was kind of place bound. I had a family in Tacoma, and it was in the process of actually buying a house. And so I just couldn't pick up and leave. I had two choices, well three basically.

One, I could have attended the University of Puget Sound. I could have attended Pacific Lutheran, or I could have commuted to the University of Washington, which was not very good. So I actually had decided to attend Pacific Lutheran, and that's why I attended Pacific Lutheran.

Excellent. So what did your family or friends think about you attending this predominantly white, Norwegian-based – Was there any sense that this was –

No, it wasn't. My family was actually committed to education. My grandmother – actually on my mother's side – my grandmother was born at the end of slavery. And education was really critical to my mother's family. The daughters and the family, she and an assistant, actually went to college in order to teach other African-Americans how to read. She wanted to teach, and that's what they really did. So education was really important to my mother's family. And so going to college was important. And so they really didn't care where I attended college as long as I attended college and got into education, basically. And that was the most important part.

Excellent. So what was your experience like at PLU, coming in in the early 1970s?

My experience was a little different from most students, because I guess I was an older student compared to other students. I was a commuter student, and I made a difference. I didn't live on campus, so I didn't experience campus life. I actually attended classes, and I went back home in the afternoon. So my experience was really different.

My experience was really a pleasant experience. Even because of the faculty, my major was sociology, and they were outstanding faculty in the sociology department, also as well as in the social science department. I also thought at first I wanted to be, I wanted to major in psychology, then I decided to go to sociology, to move to sociology. And the faculty members in social science, who I thought were very good, maybe you don't know.

You know, you also had to take a religion course, actually. I think I took two, I had to take two when I was there. And so the faculty that taught religion also, I thought was very good, very supportive. When I first started in the early, actually early, it was in 1967 when I started. I also had to go to chapel. Chapel was a requirement. And so in order to determine whether you attended or not, they gave you an assigned seat. And they would check and see if you were attending chapel, and I really didn't.

So I was requested to meet with the Dean of Students, I think it was the Dean of Students at the time, and he said, you haven't been attending chapel, and I said, no, I haven't. I have other things I need to do, can we talk for a little while, and he said, okay, no problem. So I think shortly after that, they lifted the requirement to attend chapel.

So it's all because of you?

No, not because of me, because I think the times were changing. That's basically the reason. But I had a sociology instructor, Dick Jobst. John Schiller was a chair of the social science department. I can't remember my name, advising psychology, he was very good. I had a biology instructor who was very good.

You had to have either, that was a requirement or a language or a lab science. I couldn't do the language, I tried two or three and it just didn't work out for me. I think I needed more time to study, I didn't have the time. So I went to biology, and biology was probably perfect for me. I did well in biology and was able to graduate. All in all, it was a really pleasant experience.

I decided to get a master's degree, I thought about social science, a master's in social science. I started that, and they decided to give me an assistantship, basically, and that was to teach a class.

That was frightening, because I had never taught a class, they just threw me in and said, go. I tried it and it wasn't bad. I taught for a year and decided after that year, not because of teaching a class, but because I wanted to move to a different area. That was a master's program and student personnel work in higher education. So I moved into that area. So basically, that was the area that I completed my PhD in at OSU.

Excellent. So you've mentioned that you felt that your experience with your faculty members was very good. And you also said that you think that it's possible that being a commuter student allowed you a different experience. Could you see any of your fellow students of color having different experiences, or were you just socially not in that space as a student to pick that thought?

I wasn't really that connected with, while I was attending a complete amount of graduate degree, I wasn't really involved with other undergraduate students. And so I don't know their experience. But I didn't, I don't remember, I should say, I don't remember anyone saying they had a poor experience. So I just really don't know. I just never connected with them, with other graduate students.

I was a small number of African-American students attending PLU at the time I was there. But I just don't know what they experienced.

11:01 - 18:30 Griggs's experience compared to today's students, advice

So looking back on your life and your, you know, your mass change from coming from Mississippi, coming to Tacoma, attending PLU and then moving on to Oregon State. How do you see or do you have any thoughts on how your experience may differ from what students are experiencing now in this region or in education as a whole?

Well I think that's a very good question I haven't really given myself. I don't really know, you know, I could assume certain things. I think at the time I started PLU in '67 and actually also coming to Oregon State in '72, I think that there were changes previously to me coming.

I think if I remember correctly, I think it's 65 of them civil rights legislation that was signed by President Johnson. I think I had to do with how students, all students, especially students of color were treated. Now that was the latest incident at OSU in 68 where African American students walked off campus here. And I think that the university, well the state, the state board of higher education and university, it was a very poor experience, let's put it that way.

And they really wanted to show that the state of Oregon, the state board of higher education, had actually told the universities that they could create special programs if they wanted to, not that they had to, but if they wanted to at that time, in '69.

So in 69 they created the ACTUAP program and I came in 1972 and kind of was at the end of that, I would say, situation. And I actually spoke to some of the students who actually walked off campus. Some returned and completed that degree. But there were very few here in 69 that directed a VOP, the person that was hired to start the program. Actually he was a baseball coach and he encouraged many of his baseball players who were seniors who had graduated from high school. And so a lot of them did. So I think a lot of incidents created positive changes, let's put it that way.

And you still have incidents that are negative. Not only here, I'm assuming, I don't know about PLU, I'm assuming there are incidents there also. So I really don't know, I haven't had that much contact with PLU.

So going back in time a little bit, you mentioned that education was incredibly important within your family. And obviously that's something that you have pursued and worked into your career and working with students. What's that piece of advice that you give to your students, regardless of their color, about their education and their future and finding their calling?

Give them education. That's number one. I would tell them, students will indicate, well, I don't know what to major in. And I don't think that really matters because I indicate I advise students to start. Once you start, then you'll know what you don't want to do or what you want to do. And that's an important part. You never will know if you don't move, if you don't start. So number one, tell students to start.

We have this, well, it's not a joke, but my kids always tell me to stay out of other people's business. And that's part of what I mean to do because I'm always trying to advise people, you know. And they look at me, especially when we're together, they say, I don't do that. It's something I can't give up. It's something, and I think that is, I'll say genetic in a way. It's evolving by genes because what I find though, I find out that, especially my two youngest kids, also involved with students, my middle daughter is an advisor at the University of Washington, and she works with youth kids there. And my youngest daughter works for the health department, and she's also involved with youth as young people. So I think it's a genetic thing. But they always tell me to, I don't know, I'm still good about it.

So I took this little clipping out of the paper one day, and I carried it in my wallet. I'm going to share it. So I always – if I can find it now, I may not be able to find it, I may have thrown it away, but it reminds me, it reminds me sometimes when I want to get involved in other people's business – here it is.

You have to read this to us.

Well, it was a Gemini, and I'm a Gemini. It says, "Unless there's a big red S on your chest, you are not a superhero, and it is not your responsibility to solve the world's problems. Stay out of other people's troubles unless help is specifically requested."

So you carry it with you.

I carry it with me.

Oh, I love it.

But anyway, I tend to get involved, especially with youth and young people, because I think education is important, and not just getting an undergraduate degree now. I encourage every student I can to get an advanced degree, and I tell them, the farther you go in education, the easier it is, because I think my first year was probably the hardest year, and each year became easier and easier, and I really felt that I had a lot of help and luck.

I think my PhD was probably easier than my undergraduate degree. So I tell them, you can always get an advanced degree. Sometimes students don't see themselves as getting an advanced degree, but I encourage them to do that. That's me. I always give advice.

I think it sounds like very good advice, actually. Before we wrap up, I'm just wondering if there is anything else that you would like to share or...

Well, I've been lucky. I tell people that all the time, I've been lucky all my life. I had a lot of support, not only at OSU, but also at PLU. I also had a lot of help at the JC I started, and it was a tremendous experience. Each place was a positive, tremendous experience. I don't know why, but although I retired from OSU, they decided to make me emeritus.

In a way, I'm still connected with the university. They may regret that at some point in time, but education and life has really been very positive for me. I've been very fortunate and basically lucky. I say lucky, and that's kind of where I am.

Well, I have been lucky today to share this interview time with you. Thank you so much for taking the time to do this.

You're welcome.