

Interview with Augustus White, MD, PhD

Equal Access Oral History Project

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[00:00:00]

JOAN ILACQUA: Here we go.

AUGUSTUS WHITE: My name is Augustus White and I thank you very much for your interest and I hope that I can be useful in helping you to develop this oral history. And as I mentioned, I have a lot of interest in this and I didn't tell you though that my interest in some small way is related to the fact that my aunt was a high school history teacher. She taught American history and she was a very popular teacher in that she was able to teach it in short narratives and she made them interesting. And sometimes around the dinner table we'd share some of these narratives and I'm afraid all too frequently I listened too passively. I wish I had it to do again. I would make more of an effort to remember those stories, but they were interesting, they were enjoyable, and she was an influence in my interest in education. I was never a history scholar by any means, but I do have that subjective familial interest in history. So what would be the background of my being invited to Harvard and Beth Israel Medical Center, now Beth

Israel Deaconess Medical Center? And I will try to describe it. And essentially I was prepared very well, I believe, due to my good fortune in being selected to come into the Yale orthopedic program that was headed by Professor Wayne Southwick. And Dr. Southwick is -- at that time in the country he had either the first or second in terms of the number of academic orthopedic surgeons that came out of his program and headed up programs around the country. And he was the quintessential mentor and leader and he took an interest in me and helped me very much, A, to do my residency, but to do other things that would be part of the background of why I might have been noticed by the search committee here in Boston. I worked hard in my residency, as did others.

And Dr. Southwick was a great guide and gave me an opportunity to do some clinical research which was sort of at the core of his clinical activities. It was on cervical spine surgery and I ended up reviewing his patients and writing up for the *Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery*. And this was really a nice gift. I mean whoever got that assignment was going to get attention nationally because this was sort of one of the first excellent clinical papers. Maybe I shouldn't say excellent, but it was Dr. Southwick's

surgery so it was excellent. So I did that paper, completed that paper. He also sort of nominated me for some things to allow me to get recognition, one of which I was not chosen for, but he did subject me. There was an award for outstanding orthopedic resident. And then there was a club called the Interurban Orthopedic Club which I am in now, but he wanted me to have that opportunity. He did nominate me for that and after a few rounds and a few resignations for other reasons I was able to get in that and I continue to be in that. Also Dr. Southwick wanted to develop a strength in his department in biomechanics and he gave me the opportunity to try to go and participate in that. And this was in the form of an NIH traineeship which he wrote with me as the trainee. And I was to go to Sweden and spend time studying orthopedic biomechanics. At that time the leading person in the world for orthopedic biomechanics was Professor Carl Hirsch and happily the combination of Dr. Southwick and Dr. Hirsch and my application did get funded by NIH as a traineeship. So after I finished my tour in the service, in Vietnam, one year in Vietnam, one year in California at Fort Ord Hospital, I worked hard there. [00:05:00]

And I went on to spend a year and a half in Sweden. And during that period I was working full time in research with no clinical responsibilities and able to complete a thesis and a doctoral thesis on the biomechanics of the spine, of the thoracic spine. And in Sweden you must of course publish your thesis, but you also must defend it publicly. And it's an interesting ritual. They assign three opponents, all of whom show up, as does the person defending their thesis, in white tie and tails and there's this ritual that you go through in a definite format. Anyway it was possible to successfully complete this thesis defense. You defend your thesis and you have to nail it on the door of the auditorium two weeks ahead of time. It's an interesting ritual. And then you know, it gets accepted or not accepted.

I then returned to the US and started as an assistant professor in orthopedic surgery at Yale. And so how did I get there? The things that I've mentioned sort of put together a bit of a package that would be noted in a search committee. A search committee would pick up people who were in that zone. And another thing that happened -- well, this is my assumption. I don't know who thought what when they looked at these things, but I'm assuming one of the

things that I believe allowed me some visibility was in the service during my tour in Vietnam I did some work which -- anyway I was given the bronze star for my contribution and my activities in Vietnam and that probably related to something that is something called the JCs, Junior Chamber of Commerce, Ten Outstanding Young Men Award. And historically it was only men, but in the last probably 15 years now it can be a woman or a man. And this is something I've never had a chance to say and I thank you for this because I'm going to say it right now. The year that I was accepted for the Ten Outstanding Men there were four African-Americans out of the 10 and it was pretty rare. There's usually one or two or no African-Americans in there. And these four individuals, and there were outstanding Caucasian people there, but the four individuals were Gale Sayers, who was a superstar professional running back, a fellow named Melvin Floyd who was a policeman and a minister and that was unique, and Jesse Jackson -- not Jesse Jackson Junior, Jesse Jackson -- and I was the fourth one. And so I'm happy for you to give me the opportunity to state that because I'm sure nobody has noticed that. I've never seen it. The fact that there were four out of 10 was interesting.

Anyway I think that caught some attention. And then I was just working hard, going through the usual, jumping through the usual hoops that we jump through to try to develop as an academic surgeon, and in that process, all these things together, the American Orthopedic Association, which has what's called an American British Canadian traveling fellowship, and this is a process in which every other year the British people will be -- well, change this. Every other year in the US the American Orthopedic Association will choose four American orthopedic surgeons and two Canadian orthopedic surgeons and they then get together and they go through a six week tour, mainly of Great Britain. It's London, Wales, and other parts of the United Kingdom, just on that continent. And it's a very nice tradition in which it's to develop fellowship. [00:10:00] And the people who go present papers and then you visit all the top medical centers in Britain and they present papers and you have black tie dinners and you go to museums, but it's a recognition. And usually people who get this are either associate professors or professors, but they're young. I think you have to be under 45, I believe. So that I had the good fortune with Dr. Southwick having groomed me and given me all these opportunities to be recognized in that way. And so I think that package, anybody doing a search

would see that. And so the search committee in Boston was chaired by Dr. Bill Silen who has his own -- I think I might have given you his name, but he has his own record of contributions to diversity, very substantive. I believe he was one of the first to have a female surgical resident in his program. If not, he was among the first and that's very substantive. And also on that search committee was Henry Mankin who was a bit of a mentor to me even before I came and still is a dear friend.

Anyway that search committee ended up inviting me and I looked at the opportunities, it was a wonderful opportunity for me and they decided they wanted to invite me. So that's a very detailed answer as to what from my perspective gave me, you know, prepared me. I think it's also fair to say that somewhere in the culture of the medical center and the Beth Israel Hospital there was enough momentum to say hey, let's don't not take this guy because he's African-American, let's go ahead and take him. Mitch Rabkin was the CEO of the hospital at that time and he was not on the search committee per se, but clearly very engaged in the process and has a very strong track record of social justice and was involved in the Boston community in several major organizations, a group of corporate

leaders who were getting together around issues of diversity and social justice. And so that didn't hurt. Bill Silen being there didn't hurt, Henry Mankin didn't hurt. So as best I can understand, that's the way it happened.

JII: So I'd like to take a moment to say you've been here ever since. So when you began at both Beth Israel and at Harvard Medical School you've already described encountering Bill Silen and Mitch Rabkin and Henry Mankin. Who else were you working with? Who else was here? Who were sort of the key players in how administratively things were working around here? Or at least what you remember about that time, if you wouldn't mind describing it for me.

AW: Sure. I should also mention Dan Tosteson was sort of quote, unquote on board regarding the fact that OK, we're getting ready to take this African-American guy. And I met him in the search process and he was supportive and I liked that and I was encouraged by that. Now, ask me the question again now about administration?

JII: It's one way of thinking about it of who was running things, who were in charge, who were the people either changing things at HMS, who do you remember being important and active, or at least important and active to you? We don't necessarily have to talk about the dean or a series of



deans at Harvard Medical School, but I'm curious about who you worked with, what you did, who were the key players there. And that's just as a way of jogging your memory and thinking about this time. We don't have to list who the administration was. It's not all that exciting.

AW: The orthopedic department -- most of my activities were in the orthopedic department. I wasn't quite as [00:15:00] in the generic sense engaged in the medical school, quote, unquote, but in orthopedics. And the orthopedics department was run by an executive committee that had representatives from Beth Israel, Mass General, Children's Hospital and Brigham and Women's Hospital. And at that time I think John Hall was at Children's, as I mentioned Henry Mankin was at Mass General, and Clem Sledge was at Brigham and Women's and I was at Beth Israel. And we met roughly once a month and sort of coordinated activities. And I don't know if it's a true story or not, but I've heard anecdotally that Henry Kissinger was asked once how did he manage in the tough world of diplomacy and foreign relations and the stresses of the day to day real world politics and supposedly he said, "It's no big deal, I was in academia for a number of years." (laughter) So I don't know if that's a true story or not, but anyway we worked together in that executive committee, but a lot of academic

politics were operative. And it is as it is and so that's part of it. As I said, at the time I was not so engaged with the medical school, but I knew of Joan Reed's existence and her activities. I happily had become friends with Alvin Poussaint just a little before. I got to know him a little bit before I came. I talked to him a little bit when I was in the search process and so I of course was in touch with him and friendly with him.

And then later on, after I sort of had finished my clinical and kind of research career and was more broadly engaged with medical education and moving into the school, and I guess we'll get to that later, but particularly serving as master of the Holmes Society -- I'll go into Holmes Society -- which gave me a real anchor and a real opportunity to express and work with some of my interest in mentoring and diversity and culturally competent care education. So I guess what else was going on in the medical school? you know, people were of course aware and it would come up from time to time in conversation that I was the first African-American clinical chief or professor in surgery, you know, orthopedic surgery, but working in a hospital in that capacity. I would say that -- involved in administration of course within the hospital, Beth Israel, as one of the

chiefs of service, we met frequently and the politics were there too. Not quite as intense, I think, as in the orthopedic world, but all the chiefs of services would meet with Dr. Rabkin and we would discuss plans and processes and so forth.

And I had been involved in starting the academic biomechanics laboratory in collaboration with Dr. Toby Hayes, Wilson Hayes, who I recruited to work with us there. And that by the way was something that was important, I believe -- I know -- in my pre-Harvard career, that is my Yale career. There I had recruited Dr. Manohar Panjabi from Yale whom I worked with -- I'm sorry, from Sweden whom I worked with when I was there. He's an engineer and I had started and then he helped me to continue to develop the orthopedic biomechanics laboratory there at Yale which the two labs are still ongoing and funded and producing research in orthopedic biomechanics. So I had some administrative engagement there as well.

J1: You were really [00:20:00] influential in changing Brown University's attitudes toward diversity. You talk a lot about it in your book, about urging the university to move toward pluralism instead of thinking about their student body in terms of diversity. And so I'm wondering if you

could actually talk a little bit about those changes and perhaps changes you were seeing in Boston in a similar time or if you were seeing changes. I know that I'm asking a lot of questions about HMS particularly, but I think what happened at Brown, changes that occurred at Brown, are also an important part of that story. And you know, Boston and Providence are not that far away from each other so it's something to think about.

AW: That's a good and important question and it's evolved, the answer has evolved, even to this day is still evolving. And it has to do with Brown had some student uprisings, as did all schools about that same time. And following one of those uprisings, which had occurred and which had settled down and it was a peaceful time, and I had been asked to serve on the Brown board of fellows. I served as a trustee and then I served on the board of fellows. And speaking about administration and so forth, there's a wonderful, wonderful education for anyone, whatever they're doing, but particularly if you're in academia. So when there was this quiescent period I just had the idea, it just hit me, and so I spoke to the president, Howard Swearer, and we were coming out of a meeting and I said, "Dr. Swearer, what do you think about" -- no, I guess we were on a first name basis. "Howard, what do you think about the idea now that

things are sort of quiet to maybe bringing in a group of experts from around the country who we might think could be knowledgeable about issues of" -- what did I call it? Integration. No, it wasn't integration. Diversity, I guess, issues of diversity. And maybe people from the outside so you kind of eliminate vested interests and conflicts of interest within the faculty or within our institution, but we bring in people in a neutral setting, not when somebody's occupying a building but a neutral setting, to just think about and advise Brown, ask them to advise Brown on what it could best do to be proactive and positive and effective around issues of diversity. At this time it was pretty much black students. Diversity was limited to that pretty much at that time.

And he paused for a minute and he said, "Yeah, why don't you go ahead and do that?" And he never once tried to influence in any way anybody that we invited. I kind of got some other people to help me decide whom to invite, but who we invited or how we did it. But basically we invited we invited these people to come. They made two trips to Brown, spent two or three days on each trip, and we said, "We're going to open up the university to you. You can talk to anybody, you can meet with any group of students,

any faculty. You can meet with the security force, you can meet with the dining room people, anybody you want to meet with, but study our school, study Brown, and then tell us how Brown can be most proactive and most positive and constructive around issues of diversity." And the group was very conscientious. And we had people on it such as Lou Sullivan, past secretary of Health and Human Services and a founder of Morehouse Medical School. We had my prep school headmaster, who was a very brilliant person who was a writer, but anyway he was there. We had the editor of *Black Enterprise*. I'm blocking on his name right now. And we had Lerone Bennett who's a very well regarded African-American historian. We had Maria Cole, Nat [00:25:00] King Cole's wife, who had a daughter that went through Brown. And we had a fellow named Ron Takaki who was a distinguished professor of ethnic studies at University of California Berkeley. And they were very -- I may have four others, I don't remember, but very conscientious, very engaged. And I chaired the committee and I had a professional person to help me to take notes and help me to write up the report.

Anyway that experience plus -- we had about 35 recommendations and the university followed all of those

recommendations with the exception of one which was that there should be a required course on multiculturalism. And Brown at that time, still has, holds onto the fact we require no courses, yeah, no student. So that was not followed, but one of the things in there was that there be a report from the university after 10 years on what it had accomplished in this area and that there be another visiting committee 12 years later or whatever it was. So they followed all those things. And the next committee was equally as -- I won't go into too much detail, but the first one was the American University and the Pluralist Ideal and that title actually came from one of the chaplains, and we met with faculty as well. Anyway American University and the Pluralist Ideal. And briefly he was saying OK, you have a diverse ecology but the pluralist ideal is that that diverse ecology is welcome, is brought into the institution and it identifies -- it feels comfortable identifying itself and the institution feels comfortable and there's interaction between the new students or the African-American students and the other students and the university. So the pluralist ideal was sort of mutual respect for cultures and so forth. And then the subsequent study, years later, done very similarly, was Diversity, Pluralism and Community and here kind of the synopsis of the dialogue

among the -- this time we had a similar but there were interestingly a lot more professors or a lot more expertise over that 12 year period. There were more people who appeared around the country who had expertise in diversity issues.

Anyway so the idea this time was diversity, pluralism and community which is that the diverse students, and we had more groups now, we had Asian Americans, Latinos and so forth, the diverse students would take their fair share of ownership and identity with the institution itself as well as the pluralism, recognizing other groups within the institution, and they would contribute to the institution, they would benefit with the institution on par where everyone's on sync, everybody has their fair ownership. And that concept works very well if you can do it, if it works. And of course if it works for a university it also can work for a nation. If all the people who are there are participating, are benefiting and contributing and relating to each other, learning from each other, cooperating with each other. So that experience, when I jokingly say I think having chaired those two committees, having to listen and having to write up a report of those two committees, I claim it's an honorary master's degree in diversity. But



it's amazing how much it has helped my thinking. Not that I'm thinking originally, I'm just collecting good thoughts from everyone else, but it's been enormously helpful in guiding, even to this day, things going on at Brown.

I find myself advocating that all educated people should be educated to be culturally literate, and I'll give you a little précis if you want, it's like a one-pager kind of leading up to that rationale, but that has applied all along the way in so many places including disparate health care, including ongoing issues of diversity and ways to -- and including development of courses. You know, what do you teach students, what do you teach students who you're trying to help to be culturally literate or at least culturally competent? So that was just something I stumbled into, but just a wonder-- and now I'm still -- in fact, tomorrow I'm meeting with President [00:30:00] Paxson, having a luncheon meeting, to talk about this idea of cultural literacy for all educated people. You know, so that, the idea, the goal is that you can communicate as well with and collaborate as effectively with someone of a culture different from your own as you can your own culture. Now that includes gender, that includes sexual preferences. And it sets the bar very high, but I think there's enough

knowledge and information out there now that people can use and we can develop a course, a curriculum, that will go a long toward developing the attitudes, skills and knowledge so that we all can work -- it's not only important in the patient/doctor relationship, but it's important in the client/attorney relationship. There's a whole literature on unconscious bias and biases within the legal profession. And what about the teacher/student relationship? What about the UN delegate/UN delegate relationship? What about people trying to work together in a tsunami or in a pandemic, all these things?

In fact, I asked the people, you know they got this big grant in the School of Public Health and they have all this money and I don't know how much -- you know what the contribution was? Supposed to be the largest ever given to Harvard.

JJ: It's enormous. I'm not sure what the exact number is.

AW: I would love to know. The articles don't say what the amount was, that I've read. But anyway it talked about the importance of global communication or something like that. So I called the people, I said, "Can I talk to somebody about how you guys might look at cultural literacy and so forth?" But anyway the dean sent one of his second or

third string quarterbacks to let me meet, which I won't tell him that when he comes, but I'm going to have a chance to talk to him just to see. Because I'm really looking for support to try to further develop that idea. But anyway, getting back to the question, it all stems from the opportunity at Brown, which had to be a fertile place. I mean I didn't change -- you know, I didn't hypnotize the president or do anything to Brown. Brown was there. The other thing is those reports, I'm sure, the first one anyway, the two of them actually, were not silent in how Ruth Simmons saw Brown. Ruth Simmons being the first African-American female president of an Ivy League school and of Brown, and how Brown saw her. Brown, the trustees -- this study was approved by the president and the board of trustees and the first report was acknowledged and reported on by the board of trustees. So it was in the heart of the institution and Brown was ready to do that. And it's been, as I said, very helpful in these other issues.

JJ: Excellent. That was -- I'm glad I asked about Brown. Because, like I had mentioned before, I read about it, but I didn't know everything else that went into that report and those committees. And I think it's going to be something important to think about as we do talk about your

later academic career at HMS. But I think for today we're ready to wrap up our first interview session.

AW: OK.

JI: And I didn't say my introduction on the recording so I'm going to remind everyone that today is November 18<sup>th</sup>, I'm Joan Ilacqua and this is Dr. Augustus White. We're in the Landmark center in Boston, Massachusetts. This is the first oral history interview for the Center for History of Medicine Civil Rights Project. And do I have your permission to record this interview, as we hit end?

AW: Absolutely.

JI: Good. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me today. I think we're going to have a lot more to talk about next time, but I really look forward to it.

AW: Thank you. Let me just -- this doesn't need to be on tape --

JI: I'm not going to end yet so --

AW: You don't want this on the tape necessarily. These are some more suggestions.

JI: Well --

[00:34:39]

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