Macon Memories Oral History Project

Dennis Howard and Ira Andrews

April 14, 2008

Facilitator: Lynda Wright

LW: Welcome to Macon Memories at Randolph-Macon College. This is Lynda Wright. It’s April 14, 2008. Today we’re talking with Dennis Howard and Ira Andrews.

DH: This is Dennis Howard, Class of 1972.

IA: And I’m Ira Andrews, Class of 1959. So it’s really fun, when I received a telephone call from them, or the note, email one, asking about having a conversation with you I was so excited, because I hadn’t seen you for awhile, for some time, Dennis, and I do have some memories that I hope are back in this memory bank here, but I just, I really looked forward to seeing you, and having a conversation with you again. And I wonder if you’d — part of this is to remind me — how did Randolph-Macon get on your radar screen?

DH: I was recruited by former coach Paul Webb. Coach Paul Webb came to Washington-Lee High School in the … I think it was the winter of ’67–68. And at that time he met with my high school coach, Morris Levin, from Washington-Lee High School, and Morris Levin had a policy where he wouldn’t let anyone talk to the players until after the season, but he came up and talked to Morris Levin, and later on after the season, Coach Paul Webb talked to me.

IA: Ah, so it was Paul. I saw Paul, by the way, on April Fool’s Day.

DH: April Fool’s Day?

IA: Yeah. April 1, there were a bunch of guys in my high school, Petersburg High School . . .

DH: You went to Petersburg?

IA: Yeah.

DH: Okay. I didn’t know that.

IA: Moses Malone’s school!

DH: Okay.
IA: Petersburg High School . . . there’s a Randolph-Macon graduate who is really instrumental in putting together an organization called POGOs – Petersburg Old Geezers Organization.

DH: (laughing) Petersburg Old Geezers.

IA: And we get together three or four times a year for lunch, and there are more than 200 people there. So Paul Webb comes up to those things, to those lunches.

DH: I saw him about a year or so. I think the gym was dedicated to he and Coach Nunnally.

IA: Nunnally, yeah.

DH: And I saw him, I saw his wife, and several of his children. So we had an opportunity to do a little fraternization there.

IA: Oh, that’s good, that’s good. Now, did you play for four years with him?

DH: I played for three and a half years. My freshman year, I had made the starting team, and was playing, and I’ll never forget a redhead guy from Georgetown Prep, I think it was, undercut me when I was going up for a layup, and I broke my right wrist, and I was out for about eight weeks, and came back and ended up playing a few games with the junior varsity, and then they moved me up to varsity for the tournament, and I remember they were playing the University of Baltimore, and Darrel Morris was a senior at the time, and Charlie Weston was a junior. And they were something like 20 points down. I guess the coaches said, well, you know, what the heck. We might as well see what we got for next year. And he put me in, not knowing what he would get, and I ended up scoring nine points and they came back. I think they lost by two or three points. And so I remember crying in the locker room because we had lost, and Rookie, Darrell Morris, said, well, “Why are you crying? We were out of it until you came in.”

IA: We wouldn’t have had a ghost of a chance.

DH: So I felt better, and then for the next three years I started. And when people talk about basketball, they usually forget that I was recruited for defense. And Jimmy Phelps, who was a year ahead of me, from Newport News, Virginia, I think he played at Hampton High School, he and I were a defensive tandem for two years and we were probably the best defensive tandem in the conference, and we kept most people ten or fifteen points below their average. So I’m most proud of that, when you say I played for Randolph-Macon basketball, I was taught that style by Morris Levin at Washington-Lee High School, and I was recruited so that Charlie Weston could be a scorer, and I could be a defensive stopper, and that worked out so that we won the Mason-Dixon Seven conference my sophomore year. We were 18-7.

IA: They were good years.
DH: Very good years.

IA: They were good years. Now, where did you live on campus? We were just talking, this ought to be taking place in the north wing of Mary Branch, because that’s where Toms hung out, at least his senior year, when you were president of student body.

DH: I lived two years in Mary Branch and two years in the Smith dormitory. The school went co-ed, I believe it was my junior year.

IA: Yes, ’71.

DH: And Mary Branch was a very interesting experience for me, coming on board at that time. I think you have to put it in the political-economic context of the time. When I came to Randolph-Macon, 1968, you have to think about John F. Kennedy being killed in ’64, you have to think about Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Robert Kennedy being killed around 1968, you have to think about the Freedom Riders being killed going south, you have to think about all the sit-ins that were going on, and I was absolutely terrified coming to Randolph-Macon, but at the same time I saw it as an opportunity to get an education and to further myself in life. I can remember that when I was 16-17 my mother, for Christmas — I was a spoiled brat early on, and I was the only grandson for about 20 years, so I got a lot of attention, and the Baptist Church and my grandfather and grandmother who were deacons in the Baptist Church, was a good foundation, my mother gave me a lot of attention, and my mother told me at sixteen, after she had given me a box of ashes for Christmas, (temporarily, then she took them back and put the gifts out) it was a wake-up call. She said, “Son, you’re going to get out of here next year. When you’re 18, you’re either going to college, or you go in the military, or you get a job and get a room.” And I was stunned because I was the only child in my mother’s sight. And I thought, I said, “Well gee, my mother would put me out,” and then I realized, I said, “Well, there is life after adolescence. [sic]” And so I really got very, very serious about my grades, and always maintained at least a C, C+ average, close to a B at times, and when it was time to be recruited I got five or six recruitment letters. One from Navy, one from the Coast Guard, one from Brown University, one from North Galena State, and then Randolph-Macon came up. And when Randolph-Macon came up, Paul Webb told me, he said that you can play for four years at Randolph-Macon. I was in love, my first love, with a young lady from Arlington, Virginia. And I said, well, I can kill two birds with one stone. I can go to Randolph-Macon, and then I can see this girl on the weekends.

So when I left the home, my mother told me, she said, “Don’t go down there and play and flunk out. Get the degree.” So I left and went on down and came to Mary Branch. And when I got to Mary Branch, I can remember, two white alumni [sic] had brought me down 95, 95 was just being completed, we got to Fredericksburg and took Route 1, and I said to myself, “Where are
they taking me now?” because Route 1 was about . . . It was two-lane then, and I had just seen In
the Heat of the Night.

IA: Oh, my.

DH: And Sidney Poitier had smacked Mr. Endicott, and Mr. Endicott had told him in front of
Rod Steiger, (imitates voice) “Twenty years ago I coulda had you hung for that.” And so I came
on down Route 1, had a little Hog Beer knife in my pocket, I don’t know what that was supposed
to do but it gave me some kind of courage. And I got on campus, and I remember the KA
fraternity had one or two guys in Confederate uniforms, and they were dragging a tar baby,
which didn’t help me any. So the white alumni took me up, took my bags to my room, they
were gone. Then I had to go over and get my keys and whatnot. And I met Jim Shumway.

IA: Jim Shumway.

DH: Jim Shumway was a white senior from Alexandria, Virginia…

IA: Played the trombone.

DH: …who had, he was a music major and he loved his music, and I used to always get on Jim
Shumway about using his deodorant without taking a bath. You know, it’s funny what you
remember about a guy, but I remember Jim Shumway, he took a bath about once a week. And I
was taught to take a bath every day. So Jim would get up and he would immediately brush his
teeth, and then he would spray all this deodorant on, and I remember that, and I also remember
that when I got there the bed was too short. The bed was for somebody like 6’, I was 6’5”, so I
had to put the mattress on the floor and I slept on the floor for about six weeks until they special
ordered a bed for me.

And back to my original point about Mary Branch and my experience in Mary Branch, it was the
jocks, the athletes in Mary Branch, particularly Jack King and Darrell Morris who made me feel
at home. And they played cards. They played sports, and they did whatever they did, and when
they played cards, they played poker. And I would never have enough money to play poker, so I
knew that they could outbid me if it came to buying the pot. So I never played poker, but I was
always interested in the game and I hung around the game. So one day Jack said, “Well, why are
you always sweating the game? Do you know how to play any cards?” So I told him I knew
how to play Tunk, and rummy, and pitty-pat, and coon game. When I said “coon game” they all
laughed, you know. So they figured that, the mentality was, “We’re card players, if we can play
poker, whatever game he teaches us how to play, we can beat him.”

IA: We got it.

DH: So I taught them how to play Tunk, and it was downhill from there.
IA: That’s where you got that nickname.

DH: That’s where I got the nickname, playing Tunk. Now, once I got to the end of my two years in Mary Branch, Dave Carl from the SAE fraternity and the former president of the student government approached me and he said, “Dennis, why don’t you run for student government president?” And I told him, I said, “Please, student body’s not ready for that.” I said, “Can’t you do the math?” I said, “We got 3 or 4 black students and 7 or 8 hundred white students,” I said, “They’re not going to vote for a black student; they’re not ready for it.” And right about that time, I think Howard Stevens, who was a little, I think he was . . .

IA: 5’6”. A little rushing champion.

DH: Division Three, little All-American, and a rushing champion for the state, and he had six touchdowns in one game. He was everything, could play all the sports very good, from Harrisburg, Virginia. He had rushed with the Lambda Kai fraternity, and he was the first black, to my knowledge, to rush with a fraternity on campus. And he didn’t make it, he got blackballed. I think he had like three black balls. And so right around that time, they had asked me to run. I said, “Well, no, they’re not ready,” I said, “I’m not going to go through the hazing process,” because at that time they were telling people to put wintergreen in their jock and run around the track for a mile and they were running around with bicycles and paddles and spanking them and tying them up to trees down by the James River and getting them up at all kinds of odd times of the day and night to wait on the upperclassmen.

IA: Yes, the fraternity hazing thing.

DH: So I said, “I’m not about to go through that for a blackballing experience.” So Dave Carl said, “Well, we really want to make a statement to the administration. The administration is too conservative.” And the A E Pi fraternity had a large Jewish membership.

IA: They did, yeah.

DH: And he wanted to have me run. He said, “Well you’ve got some courage, and people respect you, and you say what’s on your mind. We don’t have to guess what’s on your mind — you tell us. And you’ve been the only black here a lot of times on campus. You’re doing everything that all the white students are doing, so we know that you’re serious about education. Run, we’ll support you.” I said I wouldn’t run. Over two or three weeks he had several other students come up to me and they lobbied to run. So I said, “Well, what the hell, I’m gonna go ahead and give it a shot.” And I went out and very actively campaigned, those dumb speeches and passing out handouts, this and that. A guy named Craig Larson, white guy who eventually got on my cabinet after I was elected, he ran, just basically showed up, and he didn’t campaign at all. And he was sort of like the alternative to Dennis Howard, keep things as they are, status quo.
And I’ll never forget that the vote was 199 to 175 or 74 or something like that, and I had won by about 25 votes. And that cut both ways. It told me on the one hand you had white students that would vote for him simply because he was white. But on the other hand, it told me that you had white students who were objective enough to respond to the best candidate, the one that showed an interest in the job. And I never forgot that, I never forgot that. And while I was student government president, I think the best thing I did there was to have the Olympic Day program. And the Olympic Day program was a program where we had the Hanover School for Boys, which was primarily black teenage residents who were allowed to come out of the institution on one day and compete with their counterparts in the middle schools in handicapped and non-handicapped track events. And we had the Muslims come out from Richmond, and we had a lot of the white churches in the area come out and sell various foods and drinks and then we had President Luther White –

IA: Yeah, I remember that. He did it right here on the track and on the football field. I remember that.

DH: Right. And he never forgot, either, because I saw him ten years later at, a little more than ten years later, at Harper’s Ferry, West Virginia. We both like history. And I ran into him and his wife and I was with my wife and we talked a little bit, and he said, “Well Howard, they never should have let that go.” And I said, “Let what go?” and he said “The Olympic Day.”

IA: They should have kept it up.

DH: He said that was a good, good service. He said we never should have let it go. He said everybody benefited.

IA: Yeah.

DH: And so once I got elected student government president and started doing a few things, then they went co-ed and there was a question of where they were going to put the women. So they moved me out of Mary Branch and moved me to Smith dormitory in what was one of the former…

IA: House mother apartments.

DH: House mother apartments. And that later became, it later became sort of like a black fraternity, if you will because all of the black students partied there, and we partied a little later than the white students did, and so at a certain point, it became everybody’s sort of after-hours fraternity because when they finished partying at the various fraternities around campus they would come to our spot.
IA: Yeah we had, there was a designated close-up time for fraternities, fraternity parties, 12:00 or 1:00 or something like that.

DH: And we partied a little later. And so they got a different population, it was a different mix of people, they wanted to come and learn how to dance and whatnot. So a lot of the basketball team showed up; we would go to their fraternity parties, and then we’d end up going out. So it was a good time, so it was basically . . . the short answer to your question was Mary Branch and Smith dormitory.

IA: Smith dorm, right. Now that Smith dorm . . . were you president of student government then?

DH: I was president of student government when I went to Smith dormitory.

IA: That’s what I thought, because that apartment became the apartment for, later became the apartment for the student government president.

DH: It did?

IA: Yep.

DH: Okay.

IA: Um, we originally … hmm, I’ve got to get that unraveled. You know, the student government president was in Mary Branch, and I think what happened was when the women took all of Mary Branch we moved the president of student government up to Ms. Royston’s apartment, because that’s where she was, the house mother, and then she moved over to Moreland. But I do remember that. I remember that day. And you mentioned, I had forgotten for lack of use, the school for boys.

DH: The Hanover School for Boys.

IA: Hanover School for Boys, and there was a parallel institution, remember, Janie Porter Barrett, School for Girls

DH: Right, little further down. 301.

IA: Right, at Peaks, exactly. And as a matter of fact you’ve prompted another memory, and you may remember this . . . but fraternities and maybe some other student organizations would go over, they would adopt a cottage of students over at the school for boys, Hanover School for Boys, and guys would go over and organize a . . . athletic events, and social kinds of things for all those guys. I had forgotten all about that until you mentioned this thing, because fraternities used to do that as a service project, a service kind of thing.
DH: Right, and to close up one other point, I had mentioned coming down the road after Mr. Endicott had been smacked by Sidney Poitier with a Hog Beer knife in my pocket, I ended up within twelve hours of being on campus in Dean Andrews office, and I don’t know how he knew — well I guess I do know because the only one that knew I had a knife was me and Jim Shumway. So Jim Shumway must have did his job and told him I had a knife. So he called me in and, first of all, he asked me for the knife, and I gave him the knife. And then he said something like, “Well, the knife is not going to help you. Do the math.” And it was something like 700 white students and one of me, you know. So I gave him the knife, and I said, “Well, it gives me courage,” or “It gives me hope” or something like that. Then he took out a card and wrote his home number or some number on it to go along with his office number, and he said, “Do me a favor,” he said, “Before you take matters into your own hand, give me a call and give me a chance to work it out.” And I never forgot that and I kept that card for four years. But I don’t think I ever used the card.

IA: No, you didn’t. And I meant that.

DH: Well, I knew you meant it.

IA: You knew I did.

DH: Which gave me a little more confidence, but it was really … coming to Randolph-Macon was a big leap for me because even though I had gone to six years of segregated school in Fairfax County and Arlington County and six years of integrated school in Arlington County, I had only been away from home one time, and that was going to the University of Virginia for the state basketball championship in 1966. So telling me you’re going to take me down the road and leave me 100 miles of home, it was less than 100 miles from home, and I had to do four years, was very anxiety-provoking.

IA: And you’re right, there’s no ducking the fact that, as you described it, the math. That was a tense time for all of us. And I’m privileged to have lived through that with you and with Hayward, and Howard, and Flock . . . was Floyd Claiborne was here . . . was Floyd Claiborne here?

DH: Floyd Claiborne was one year behind me, he was from Richmond, and he was the first black to successfully pledge a fraternity, and he pledged Lambda Kai.

IA: Lambda Kai, yep.

DH: He was one year behind me, and then after him we got three or four blacks in the next class. Fletcher Johnson was in the next class.

IA: And Jerry.
DH: And Jerry Ross was in the next class, Reggie Barley, Dave Chavis, and Charlotte Beaman, and Gwendolyn someone, I can’t remember Gwendolyn’s last name, but that was a fairly big class.

IA: Great kids. I mean great people, now, but they were kids to me. I remember, oh yeah, Charlotte Beaman, she was a dynamite person. Absolutely wild. They were terrific. And well, things weren’t … things were mostly uneventful on the race scene. Not entirely. Flock, I mean Hap, Haywood [Payne], had come to us from Virginia Union, and I’ll never forget, I’ll never forget one of the most embarrassing things for the college, and for me, because Haywood was like you, just a terrific young man, and we … because he’s from Richmond, he had come here from Virginia Union, transferred, chemistry major … somebody slashed his tires. That killed me, and it killed a lot of us. And I bought him, from my office budget, I replaced his set of tires. I couldn’t do any more than that, because the Lord only knows, he couldn’t find out the perpetrators, those cowardly people. But we made that part of him whole.

But those were interesting, interesting times. And not easy, not easy for you. You all were very courageous young men, and later on with Charlotte and others, young women.

DH: When I look back at Randolph-Macon, I look at other experiences educationally beyond high school and evaluate the value of Randolph-Macon College. When I was in high school, I had about a 2.3 average, when I left Randolph-Macon I had about a 2.3 average with four or five Fs in math or math-related courses. I really was, outside of math, I was a good student.

IA: Good student, yeah.

DH: Then I went to Howard University and I got and 3.2 average. I went to Southeastern University and I got a 3.75 average. I got a master’s degree in social work from Howard, a master’s in business and public administration from Southeastern University, and a BA in sociology from Randolph-Macon. And what that meant to me was I had matured later as a student. Once I got married and started having kids, I was a lot more focused and put forward a better effort. But when I look back at all three of the schools, the bottom line for Randolph-Macon was that Randolph-Macon taught me how to survive seven days a week in a white society as a black male in the early post-Jim-Crow civil right days. The value of Howard University was that it taught me how to survive with other blacks in a black urban educational environment, and that was a different challenge, but it was in many ways just as painful. When I went to Southeastern University, Southeastern University taught me how to exist as a black adult male with third-world people from the Middle East and from Africa. And with all three settings I had to learn the perception that these other individuals had of the black male, and the challenges that I had to overcome to compete with these individuals in society. And I think that the sum total of all three experiences was superior to going to either one exclusively and leaving it off. And I
found out that I had an advantage, when I looked at other similarly-situated individuals who were black males and they didn’t have those experiences, I always had a competitive edge in terms of the values of skills that I brought to the tables, the networks I could pull forward, and that was a reward.

But earlier on, I think the real rock-solid foundation that I have that got me off to a good start was my Christian faith, going to the African-American church, my grandparents being deacons and deaconess 35–40 years, and the church, my mother spoiling me, giving me a lot of attention as the baby and the younger son, and the only grandson for twenty years, and then the family extended. It was an advantage having three generations in my grandparents’ home because the values that they had as older generation members were more faith-based, and they taught you a lot of common sense and a lot of survival skills. And a lot of that has been lost now. So it was those things, and then the whole idea that it takes a village to raise your child. There was discipline. Anybody in the community that saw me doing anything wrong could spank me. And everybody pretty much gathered on Sunday at the church, and if one of the older people said, well you didn’t speak, or you didn’t show respect, or you did something, and told your parents or your grandparents, you had a spanking coming.

I can remember one time that I had stole two dimes in the first grade. I was a poor little kid, I mean, my parents separated when I was like nine months old, and I really lived in a two-room shack with no running water, and an outhouse and a well, and my father had started the foundation of a three-bedroom house but never finished it before he and my mother broke up. So we really were below the poverty level, but because we had such a strong community support system, everybody traded off, we didn’t feel it. We didn’t know it at the time. But back to the school, I had gone to the school and we were taking gym, and this young lady had two dimes in her penny loafers. And something just told me, I guess the Devil made me do it …

IA: As Flip Wilson …

DH: As Flip Wilson used to say, the Devil made me do it. I took those two dimes and bought, at the time you could buy two for a penny butterscotch cookies. And I bought forty butterscotch cookies.

[Everyone laughs]

And sat there and charmed the other kids with the butterscotch cookies. And then, they knew I didn’t have any money, so when they questioned me on it, somehow they tripped me up, and I ended up telling on myself. And so when I got home, well actually, the teacher gave me a note and told me to take it home to my mother and said, “You better give it to her, because if I see her in church on Sunday and say that you didn’t give it to her I’m going to tell her what the contents was.” So I took the note home and the short and long of the story is that I got four or five
whippings from aunts and uncles before my mother finally laid hands on me, and I was glad when she did because that was the final whipping, but they whipped me for stealing, but more than stealing, because I had lied about it. And so I never forgot that, and I think a lot of that is missing now. I think we’re sparing the rod and losing a lot of the children. And I think another advantage we had back in that situation was that my grandmother was always home. And she ran the house like a drill sergeant. And everyone had a role and a responsibility, and I had, my mother had six brothers and six sisters, and one of the sisters was always in that house, it was your day to do this or that, and the grandbabies always were your responsibility. So somebody was always home, and there was always instruction and supervision.

IA: Yeah. That’s really interesting. And what I find fascinating in hearing you talk about your experience is how self-analytical you’ve been. It’s fascinating for me to sit here and hear you, Dennis, reflect on Randolph-Macon, Howard, and Southeastern. It’s just, it’s fascinating. You know yourself and you’ve analyzed situations in life. And I hope that other folks do that, but my hunch is that they don’t.

DH: It’s a survival technique. You have to be able to look at the lay of the land and assess where you are, and where you’re trying to go, and formulate some kind of plan and schedule for getting there.

IA: Yeah.

DH: You have to know the rules of the game, if you will, and you have to know what you’re bringing to the table, what the negatives are, and what the positives are. I guess the military did that for me, the 35 years in the military did that for me, and also just competing in life. When I was at Randolph-Macon I had a … my routine at Randolph-Macon was that I would study Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. And then I would party Friday, Saturday, and part of Sunday. I’d try to go to church, but then I would rest up and get ready for the workday. Now if I had a big exam, I would change the schedule and I might cram on the weekend and make it a seven-day study schedule. Now it didn’t work for math, because math is accumulative. If you don’t lay a strong foundation in math, it’s hard to study the rules and postulates for the exam. You can’t do it. So I had problems in math, but later on, once I got beyond the math distribution requirement and got into my major I did much better.

IA: Who was — you’re a soc major, and when I looked there in your book, that wonderful memory book you brought, there was Mouaffac Chatti.

DH: Mouaffac Chatti.

IA: Who else was in the department then? I didn’t look at a catalogue.

DH: I remember a Mr. Jordan.
IA: Oh yeah, yeah, of course. Yeah.

DH: A Mr. Jordan, and a Mouaffac Chatti, those are the two I remember.

IA: Yeah, Bob Jordan. He lives in Hanover County, lives in Ashland, he and his wife Pat Jordan. And our kids and their kids went to school together. Yeah, okay. Bob Jordan.

DH: I can remember at Randolph-Macon a radical transformation of the student body. And it went from being very conservative and very resistant to change my freshman year, where I, in many of my classes, because I had a black, militant value system, with heroes that included Huey Newton, Bobby Seals, Angela Davis, H. Rhett Brown... there’s a congressman who said, “Burn, baby, burn,” who I’m blocking on that used to be chairman of some committee, went down to Bimini or something like that and they stripped him of his chairmanship. I can’t think of his name. But those were my heroes.

IA: From New York?

DH: From New York.

IA: Adam Clayton Powell?

DH: Adam Clayton Powell, that’s exactly right. Adam Clayton Powell.

IA: Abyssinian Baptist Church.

DH: Right. He was a hero of mine and when I was in the student government office, those posters were plastered all over my student government office. And at that time, with all the assassinations that were going on in the larger society, there was a lot of racial tension. And I would end up going into a sociology class or a religion class with Professor Edwards, and many times I would have to defend my values by myself. And I would put my back to the wall and the whole class would take shots at me. And earlier on I thought there was some resistance from the faculty as well, because I thought that they expected less from a black student, and I thought that the grades reflected that. And I can remember when Miller Davis from Smithfield, Virginia and I were sociology majors, and we took several courses together. And I used to tutor Millard Davis. Millard Davis was a white student whose dad owned a lumber company.

IA: Lumber company, I remember that.

DH: And he was just basically coming to get a degree to inherit the lumber company and say he had a credential, he was an educated man. For me, I was trying to do it all with a degree, it opened a lot of doors. And so I was tutoring Millard Davis, and when the grades came out, Miller got a B, and I got a C. So I said, “Millard, go get all your exams and bring them here.”
So Miller did, and I got mine, and I went and copied them. And I caught Dean Mabry, he was what, Dean of the College at the time?

IA: Yeah, William Alexander Mabry.

DH: He was Dean of the College. And I caught him on the way into Peele Hall one morning, and I said, “Dean Mabry, I think there’s a little racial discrimination going on here.” And of course that got his attention. He said, “Well what … what are you talking about?” So I gave him about four or five exams and on the objective part of the exams, I had maybe 50-75 points more than what Millard Davis had in terms of the objective score. But now, on the subjective part of it, he had maybe twice that many points than what I did. And so I had gave supporting information to support my position, and I told Dr. Mabry, I said, “Well, okay, I’m a black student,” I said, “Now, you can’t expect me to think white,” I said, “These are my heroes, and I have a good position here,” I said, “They’re just not accepting my position.”

So I heard later on that he had went to a faculty meeting, and he had presented that same position, and from that point on …

IA: Things changed.

DH: Things changed. And my grades improved — they didn’t improve that much in math, but in everything else, my grades improved. From my senior year on in, they improved a lot. And I can remember when I was a senior, we had a weak basketball team when I was a senior because two or three recruits that were freshmen, for whatever reasons, these guys were good for maybe … they could combine for maybe 50 points between the two of them, right. One guy had personal problems with the school and something about an academic issue. He had to leave, he transferred to the University of Maryland. The other guy was redshirted. And about that time, Newsweek magazine came out with a report that black athletes were being exploited by schools, and that a large percentage of black athletes were not graduating. And so there I was sitting there with a C-average, and needing to pick up a math course for distribution reasons to graduate, and I also needed to do a senior project to graduate because I didn’t have enough distribution points.

So Coach Paul Webb called me in and he was saying that because I was the outstanding senior forward and the captain of the team, I would need to step up and really be a super, super athlete to carry the team, but he was basically asking the impossible, because at that point I was already the defensive stopper, I was averaging about 12–13 points a game, close to double rebounds, and I had 5 or 6 assists a game. And so my mother’s voice came back to me, “Don’t play; bring home the degree.”
So rather than give 120% that I had given in the previous three years, I could only give 100%. And I went ahead and worked, and had everything going well, except I had a Dr. Peace …

IA: Karl Peace.

DH: A Dr. Peace who …

IA: Math.

DH: … who was one of the most difficult math teachers at Randolph-Macon College. And I had always wondered whether they had planned to give me Dr. Peace, right? Because there was, I mean you had … students got to know faculty just like faculty got to know students. And we knew who were the conservative ones were, and who the liberal and moderate ones were. And Dr. Peace wasn’t somebody that I wanted to be assigned to, and I tried to change and couldn’t change. And so Dr. Peace, I think he ended up, my senior year second semester, he ended up passing maybe three or four students in that particular class. And I flunked. You know I got like a D, D-, F, you know, or something like that. He only gave two or three grades. And so I went to Professor Mouaffac Chatti, and I almost had tears in my eyes. And I said, Look here, I passed the senior project on black-white miscegenation in the United States, I passed, I think I got a B in that, I passed all other classes, I was doing quite well, but I had failed the math course. And I was wondering how I would get the money to come back to Randolph-Macon to make up the difference. And I didn’t have any understanding of what the logistics of it was. And he said, “Howard, you don’t have a problem. Go to VCU and go to the math department and take this course on finite math. And just apply yourself and come back and graduate next year.”

IA: Transfer that course in.

DH: And so when I got home, I had … I went, I passed the finite math course, I ended up getting a C+ on it, and I got B, C, D, you know, it totaled out to be a C, C+. So when I got home I had three letters from the draft board, and I put them in chronological order, and the first one said, “You have been selected for, you are such and such an age, you are to report to the Arlington County Selective Service Board for a physical.” And I hadn’t got the letter because it went to my mother in Arlington and I was in Richmond for summer school. The second one said the same thing, with the additional comment saying that “You have failed the first one, report for the second one.” So the third letter I got said, “You are hereby drafted into the United States Army, report to Fort Jackson, South Carolina, October whatever it was.” And by the time I got home from summer school, I had maybe six weeks before I was to go into the United States Army. Went down to Fort Jackson, South Carolina. And when it was time to graduate, I asked my company commander for leave, and he wanted to know what it was about, and I told him, “I’m trying to graduate from college,” and he said, “Well of course you’re going to go for that! That’s once in a lifetime! You don’t want to miss that.”
So I came in, and I’ve got some pictures in the book there of it really is about eight or nine family members that came down, including my grandmother, my aunt, my mother, my former brother-in-law, my sister, and several church members. And I remember that was a big showing of support. I didn’t appreciate it at the time, but to have three generations there was a big showing of support. And then I can remember that former President Luther White gave out the degrees. I think it was the registrar, Mr. Hopkins, was the one who sorted out …

IA: Yeah, he handed the tubes.

DH: … and handed the tubes to President White, and Mr. Hopkins and I didn’t … there was a little friction there. For whatever reason, we never said anything to each other, but I got the feeling that he didn’t like me, and I’m sure he got the same from me. So when it came time to get my degree, I got my degree from President White, and I made a special stop for Mr. Hopkins, and shook his hand and hugged him. And he turned purple.

(Both laugh.)

DH: You know it was my way of saying, “Hey, you know, I completed the course.”

IA: I’ve fought the fight.

DH: And that was about it. You talked about mentors on your list here, I think … well, I don’t think I know. I always thought that my strongest mentors at the college were Dean Andrews, Professor Mouaffac Chatti, Professor Longacre in the art department, Professor Edwards in the religion department, Coach Paul Webb, and I have to say, behind the scenes, I think President Luther White did a lot. He put me on the Student, on the President Student Life Council, something like that. It was a committee that advised him, and I was there with the editor of The Yellow Jacket newspaper, and one of the senior members of the judicial council, and one other woman that was on the judicial council. And it gave us access to the President of the college. And when you look back at it, you have to appreciate anytime you have that kind of access to power, and you have the ability to make recommendations, it’s a very special, very special opportunity.

Favorite courses … I enjoyed sociology, and I enjoyed the religion. One guy I omitted that I can’t omit: Chaplain William Gibson.

IA: Bill Gibson.

DH: Yeah, we called him Bill Gibson. He was my faculty advisor for my sophomore year, and he called me into his office. I think his office was in the Old Chapel then.

IA: That’s right.
DH: And called me over, I didn’t know what he wanted. He said, “Well, Dennis, you know, you’ve been here a year. It’s time to sort out what you’re going to do, you know, with your life, with your career, what are you going to do? You just can’t keep going to school forever.” And that was the farthest thing from my mind. I had went to school, you know, allegedly to do something with art education, or art history. You really couldn’t do anything but be maybe an artist and have rich patrons or maybe to teach art in school. But he said, “Well, what do you want to do?” And I’ll always remember this. I said, “Well, I don’t know what I want to do.” He said, “Well, what do you think you want to do?” I said, “Well, I don’t know, I want to help people.” And he stopped and he paused and he looked at me, he said, “Oh, that’s so good. That’s great. Would you like to be a minister?” And I said, “Well, Chaplain, I don’t play with God. I’m really not that straight. I can’t walk the line that straight.” So he said, “Well, what about psychiatry, psychology,” he went on down the line, psychiatry, psychology, then he went to sociology. And in each of the subjects that he mentioned, each one of the terminal degrees that he mentioned, I asked him what was the terminal degree, and how much money would it cost. And he said psychiatry and psychology required PhDs, and he got to sociology and said, “Well you’ll probably only need a social work degree, and they will probably require you to be licensed in the future, but right now you just need a master’s degree.”

So based on the money and the gut feeling, I said, “Well, if I can work with people and I only have to be required to get a master’s degree, I think I want to go with sociology, social work. And later on, when I got to the military, there was a Howard alumnus there, Geri Langley who was, she was a supervisor of social work services in the drug center where I ended up working for the Army. And she told me that she could get me into Howard University with a recommendation. She said, “You’ve got a beautiful gift for gab, you love working with people.” I was doing group therapy with co-alcoholic females, and soldiers coming back from Vietnam with drug habits, and so she wrote to Howard University school of social work, and she got me an interview with them. And the long shot of the interview was that I was going to start 6–8 weeks behind my class once I got out of the military in October. And they wanted to know whether or not I could catch up. And they talked to me and I talked to several of the faculty members and they said, “This guy is sharp, we think he can.” And I think having gone to Randolph-Macon and the other schools I had gone to, and coming from the community I had, I had a good solid foundation so that when I hit the ground, I did catch up.

IA: Yeah. Great.

DH: And so that was a pivotal recommendation and a pivotal placement in my career, and I’m now at the point of retiring from the military and from civil services after 35 years in one and 21 years in another with a license in social work. And I really worked with tens of thousands of people and I really enjoyed doing it.
IA: Well, this is had been fun, Dennis. And it’s fun hearing about how your career has blossomed and I’m sure that lots of people have benefited by, not only your prodding, but your insight into life. And to think that Randolph-Macon had a little bit to do with that is really gratifying.

DH: Randolph-Macon had a lot to do with it because actually, when you think about the fact that it is a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant dominated culture, and Randolph-Macon was my first full-time 7/24 experience with that culture, it got me off at a young age on a good foundation, and that was very helpful.

It doesn’t hurt you. I remember getting a ticket or two. I remember the first ticket I got, I went to Arlington County for going ten miles over the speed limit, my first ticket. And the judge in Arlington County asked what did I do and I said, “Well, I’m a student.” And said, “Where do you go to school?” and I said, “Randolph-Macon,” and the judge …

(He demonstrates. Ira Andrews laughs.)

IA: He did a double-take, huh?

DH: He did a double-take. He had to be thinking, you know, “How does a black guy go to Randolph-Macon? That’s not what I recall,” right. So it didn’t hurt me in any way. It opened a lot of doors for me, going to Randolph-Macon.

IA: Yeah, that’s great. That is great.

LW: Thank you so much for sharing your memories, Dennis Howard, and thank you, Ira Andrews, for being with us today.