

Voices of MSU

Interviewee: Joe Darden (JD)

Interviewer: Mileena McDonald (MM)

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MM: Where were you born?

JD: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I grew up there and that is the city that shaped me; it developed who I am. I owe it to who I am today in terms of my access to opportunities. I went to the University of Pittsburgh and I got my PhD there. I did research on the city; I wrote my dissertation on the city of Pittsburgh entitled *Afro-Americans in Pittsburg: the Residential Segregation of a People*. It is one thing to do a dissertation, but it is another to do it on a place that you know well. That is one reason why I did it.

One must also have passion when they do research of this nature. After receiving that degree, which I wrote at the University of Chicago. Once I arrived at Michigan State, my objective was to do a city that was close as well. From that day forward, I started to conduct my research on Detroit. From the time I arrived, up until today, I continue to do research on Detroit. I am now writing my third book on Detroit. I just signed a contract today; in fact, I just got it. It will cover Detroit from the days of bankruptcy up to the present and beyond.

The other two books, one was in 1997 that looked at the uneven development in the city of Detroit compared to the suburbs. It was co-authored with some other individuals: a sociologist, urban planner, and historian. The second book was published in 2013 called *Detroit Race Riots: Racial Conflict, an Effort to Bridge Racial Divide*. It was written in cooperation with Dr. Richard Thomas, who is an historian, recently retired.

The third book, which I just signed as a contract, I will write myself as a sole author. It is called *Detroit after Bankruptcy*; it is the city's movement toward a more inclusive place to live. It covers whether Detroit is dividing opportunities to everybody, all neighborhoods, whether it is dividing opportunities to just for the wealthy developers in downtown. That is what it looks like; that is what I am measuring to see whether that is the case. It is a trilogy—the third one, my last book on Detroit—once I have finished it, I think I will have studied that city sufficiently. Those students who will come after me will have enough to read to understand the city of Detroit. That is where I am today.

My courses are also related to that because I teach courses in Urban Geography. I use a lot of my own research to inform the students of what happens in class. I use that as a way to supplement my teaching. If you do research, you can also teach what you do in terms of research; it allows the students to get firsthand knowledge of what it is they are trying to understand. That is what I do. And, so that has been going on for forty-five years. I have not

seen much change in students; they are similar from when they arrived. It is very interesting because they have not changed very much over that forty-five period, to my surprise.

MM: Were you able to collaborate with people at MSU?

JD: Well, I have collaborated with some people. Usually, the individuals have to be someone who can contribute a kind of value added. For example, in the first book that I did, I had to have an urban planner as a co-author because it was difficult to understand everything without it. An historian was also important as well as a sociologist. So, together we were able to do that book on *Detroit: Race and Uneven Development* in a much more productive way because we had it in a collaborative way.

The second book that I did on *Detroit Race Riots: Racial Conflict, an Effort to Bridge Racial Divide*, I needed a historian who was also an expert when it came to race relations. Richard Thomas was good at both and was also a scholar. He was helpful in getting that book done because it was a historical kind of book. We went back to the riots of '67 and tried to understand why they occurred, so his support was very helpful in that one.

This book that I am working on now, I can do it myself because I got the background I needed; I am moving forward to the future. I would like to do it alone because in this case, I will not have to satisfy my co-authors; I can just sort of decide myself whether this particular analysis is going to be one that I want without them having to decide it may not be. There are some advantages to doing it yourself and some disadvantages as well. But, at this stage, I thought it was better to do it myself.

I do collaborate with people on things that I think are necessary. One thing about collaboration, you have to be very cautious because if the person does not agree on some of these matters, it can cause you to slow down the project. You can't get it done on time. It has its drawbacks, but it also has its strengths because sometimes they contribute quite a bit to make the project stronger.

MM: Specifically for the Urban Affairs researching, were there other people you were able to collaborate with? Or was there some way you could access information through different networks at MSU?

JD: Richard Thomas, again, historian, we used the Bentley Archive, the Archives of Wayne State University. We did not use archives at Michigan State University for some reason, but we used the archives in other places. They were helpful; I am a census person analysis. Most of my research, I use the census data to do it. I may use business directories and other kinds of documents, but I am also a person who quantifies and measures. For example, when I talk about residential segregation, you have to measure that. How much exists? You cannot

determine how much exists by observation alone. You have to measure it through a methodology. I use the Index of Dissimilarity to do that. It is a method used to understand the unevenness of distribution of two population groups. It is a very well-known analysis you can use. That is what I used to determine whether segregation was increasing or decreasing when it comes to Metropolitan Detroit, so, I use that.

I have also created an index since I have been here called the Darden Composite Index of Socioeconomic Inequality; I created that index back in 2004. It is an index I use to determine in Metropolitan Detroit how much inequality exists between neighborhoods. I do that in a way to determine whether extreme poverty exists and also extreme wealth exists in the same metropolitan area. I do that with the index because it allows me to measure whether changes are occurring—deducing inequality and why people do not achieve as much.

I argue that they do not achieve as much because they live in certain neighborhoods that create disadvantages. For example, I am a strong believer that the reason for academic achievement inequality along racial lines is because some groups live in neighborhoods where the schools are the least when it comes to academic achievement. The quality of schools determine the outcome in terms of academic achievement. There are students who do not live in neighborhoods where the schools are high achieving; they do not achieve as much.

The students from Michigan State, for example, are disproportionately coming from schools that are higher achieving compared to schools that are lower achieving. Students who happen to live in low achieving neighborhoods do not get equal opportunity to come to a university because they were not in those schools that were higher achieving. Now, students do not have the option to go to any school they want to. They are restricted as to where they live. Restricted by boundaries created by somebody else, not themselves. The state of Michigan, for example, does not provide equal opportunity to all schools in terms of students who attend them. So, they are disadvantaged because of that.

MM: When and how did you become interested in the Urban Affairs Program?

JD: When I arrived here in 1972, my job was essentially a joint-appointment. I had one appointment within the Geography Department and the other was Urban Affairs. It was called the Center of Urban Affairs at that time. It was created in 1969 as a result of the societal events that were occurring in cities throughout the United States. The president of the university wanted research to be done on these issues to find out why they were occurring. The Center for Urban Affairs was an outgrowth of that, so one of my appointment was in Urban Affairs and the other appointment was in the Department of Geography.

In fact, when I was sitting at home in Pittsburg, I got my PhD; I got a call from the then Mayor Wilbur Brookover. He was mayor of East Lansing at the time. They were looking for someone to

come to Michigan State. I had applied and they were looking for someone to do urban affairs and do the geography stuff. So, I came in with the joint appointment to do that and that facilitated my research. Urban Affairs Programs had a mission to address the so-called disadvantaged population in the cities in the United States and the cities of the state of Michigan. It was a very good opportunity because I had a passion for doing things to help those who are disadvantaged. I still have that passion today when it comes to issues of social problems, poverty, and misunderstandings in the basis of race. Those are the kinds of things that I do and I start out by looking at neighborhood characteristics.

I am a firm believer that where you live can influence your whole life cycle: how much education you get, how much in terms of opportunity you receive, in terms of employment, and ultimately, whether you live a long time in terms of life. Your health, for example, all of these things are related to the neighborhood characteristics of where you live. So, I always start out with that. Then, I try to understand the differences that exists between those who live in neighborhoods that are high socioeconomic status compared to those who do not. And see what the differences are in terms of life cycle, their chances in life, their employment, their status, their income, all of these things are related.

That is what I do. It was an ideal situation for me to have the joint appointment. Geography as a discipline is not a discipline that engages necessarily in those kinds of issues. By having the joint appointment, one unit with a mission to do that allowed me with the opportunity to do things that I wanted to do. That is why I did those.

MM: What are some memorable experiences you have of the Urban Affairs Program?

JD: Interesting, quite a few. In my role as a geographer and in Urban Affairs, I was often asked to come and testify in court cases on school desegregation. At the time I arrived, there were several cases of conflict over school desegregation. You had the situation in Detroit where the students wanted to go to a school that was high achieving and could not go. There were court cases introduced at the time. I was called in to testify on behalf of the NAACP, who was fighting against the school segregation. They wanted an expert to do a study to see what the consequences were of students who did not get an opportunity to go to high achieving schools; I was called in to do those things.

Those were very important moments because it allowed me to better understand the frustration of federal judges who have to deal with this situation. I recall vividly in the case of Metropolitan Detroit, the case of nine-year-old Bradley versus Milligan. Bradley was a black student who wanted to go school in a high achieving area; he could not go. He filed a lawsuit against the state of Michigan. The Governor at the time was William Milligan, Republican; he opposed Bradley going to schools that were high achieving outside of the city of Detroit.

The court case occurred and we had one federal judge in the state of Michigan at the time agree with Bradley to go to school outside, but he was turned down by the U.S. Supreme Court in the case *Milligan v. Bradley* overruled him. Bradley was trapped in the city of Detroit. Even though the schools were not good, he had to go to that school anyway. Black kids were essentially locked out of any high achieving schools because very few existed in Detroit at that time.

That was very interesting because the federal judge, at that time, in the state of Michigan, who issued the order to desegregate lost most of his white friends because they did not like the fact that he was doing that. They were friends he had known for several years; they did not like the fact that he issued an order to desegregate. He became ill after that, a lot of stress, and died not too long after that. It gave me great respect for judges because they have to make these critical decisions sometimes that are constitutional decisions; they have to go against their friends they have known for years, they lose them, and they have to suffer the consequences of that.

So, I was exposed to these lawyers. I do like lawyers now. Some people do not like lawyers; I like lawyers. Lawyers are good because they can change the course of history by court cases that they argue and federal judges will sometimes rule in their favor. I always like the fact that when I testify in court cases, the judges rule based on my testimony. That is one of the best feelings I have.

I also have been asked to speak before organizations to help them understand the situation. The pride that I feel, not just teaching the students here at Michigan State, but when I go out to the community itself and present that information to them. I get a special feeling out of that because that goes beyond that walls of academia; it goes to the real people. Hopefully, they can benefit from the information I provide. So, that is some of the feelings I have with that. Those are some of my special thoughts that I have. I usually think about that. It is the kind of situation where a professor should have a mission to go beyond the walls of academia, but I need to have more than that. I need to provide knowledge to the average person out there if I am going to do my job appropriately. That is how I feel about it. Every chance I get to do that, I do it. And use information that I have to actually benefit those in need.

We are a land grant university. For example, Michigan State, that is what we call land grant when we go beyond the walls of academia and do it. Traditionally, the land grant message was that professors would give information to farmers in the state of Michigan, so they could do a better job when they raised their crops or protect their animals. If you borrow the land grant mission in urban context, my job was to go out to the people in urban areas who were poor and in need. I provide information to help them economically rise up and take advantage of the situation that they did not know about without the knowledge. So, I was carrying out the land grant mission in urban context. That is what the Urban Affairs program allowed me to do.

MM: Why did the Urban Affairs Program end in 2003?

JD: Very good question, the Urban Affairs Program ended large part because of politics. During that time, the university had been going through economic issues and problems. The Urban Affairs Program was controversial because it helped people who were poor and in need, the disadvantaged, and that caused controversy among those who did not want that to happen. Urban Affairs Programs issue every year under my direction what is called State of Block Michigan Report where we assess the situation in the state of Michigan to see how much progress was being made by blacks compared to whites, how much inequality still existed, whether the inequality was declining or not. We would have a press conference issue the report.

Once we did that, politicians sometimes did not like our findings. They would then pressure the administration to try to reduce our activities because we were saying things and writing things. Writing about things that they did not necessarily agree with, so that was it. All throughout the program, we were highly controversial when it came to that. When the university started experiencing financial problems and talking about getting rid of units to accommodate the economic situation, Urban Affairs always was one of those units others wanted to get rid of.

Part of it was politics; that is why it happened. Not surprising, because the whole climate change around the state. There were fewer and fewer interests among people to deal with these kinds of issues. A much more conservative climate started to occur around the country, around the state of Michigan. As a result of that, change came and Urban Affairs was one of the victims of that kind of movement from a more progressive stage to a more conservative stage.

MM: Do you think there are still opportunities for those interested in Urban Affairs to conduct research? Or do you think it is prevented because of this more conservative atmosphere?

JD: Good question. Instead of having a unit like a department or center dedicated to that, we do not have that. It does not exist anyone doing the research has to do it on his or her own. There is no unit to do it; you have to collaborate with someone else yourself. There is no unit with the mission. It makes it more difficult to do, but it can be done. I continue to do it myself; there are other professors who do the same thing. The only difference is you are not necessarily supported by a unit with the mission to address some of those urban issues, so that means that they are not addressed as effectively as they could be.

We were not the only one affected by that. Wayne State had a whole college of Urban Affairs that was eliminated doing the same kind of politics, climate change. It eliminated that whole College of Urban Affairs. Even though Wayne State is in the heart of Detroit, there is no unit that deals with these issues. Same with University of Michigan, there is no unit that deals with

this issue. In a sense, we were not the only ones where this happened. There is still a need for these things to be addressed, but it is difficult to do it. In this climate, we have issues related to inequality, immigration from non-European countries, and settlement in terms of cities. Those issues are not really top priority, so it becomes difficult to address those.

MM: When did you first become interested in pursuing this career in Geography and why?

JD: Good question again, I became interested in Geography because it goes back to my belief in where you live. My father always said the first thing you have to do when you grow up is find a place to live, own a home, so in a sense, that is the kind of cultural priority that I had. I was motivated by the importance of ownership the importance of neighborhoods so those things I had. Then, I was also interested by those that were doing research at the time. Keep in mind that geography, unlike some of social science disciplines, had very few African Americans and people of color.

You may be surprised that when I got my PhD in 1972, I was number nine in the whole country with a PhD. I was the ninth African American with a PhD in Geography in 1972. Nine. I came here as number nine. Now, having said that, forty-five years later there is still fewer than fifty Africa Americans with a PhD. If you break that down by gender, you are talking fewer than twenty African Americans with a PhD. So, we are still underrepresented; grossly underrepresented. Part of the reason why I was motivated was that underrepresentation. I wanted to fulfill that and that motivated me to continue to do it as well.

Over the years, I have tried to recruit more into the field; it is difficult, a challenge, not easy, but necessary to provide students with role models to go into this field and continue to carry on the work. I would like to have my work carried on after I am retired. Have somebody that can carry this work on and keep doing it. Those are the reasons why I want to stay in geography and I am very pleased that I had done it.

MM: What made you choose to teach at MSU?

JD: I was applying for a job in many places really. This one invited me up for the interview after I applied. They liked what I was saying, I guess, I liked Michigan State when I came and so it was a good fit for me to arrive at that time. But, if another place offered me a position with the similar kind of opportunities, I may have gone elsewhere. It just so happened that Michigan State made the offer. I do not regret it, but that is what happened. Had they not and some other place had like University of California, Los Angeles, I would have gone there. It just worked out for me at the time and it has been a positive experience during the forty-five years I have been here.

MM: What have been some of the biggest challenges you have faced in your teaching so far?

JD: The biggest challenges have been trying to get students to address certain critical issues and give them some consciousness. What I find many times with students, one, they may not know, but once they do, what do they do about it? It is lack of consciousness. That is what I try to do with them sometimes. I am a bit somewhat disappointed that I do not get enough of them to take action once they see there is an issue out there that needs to be addressed. For example, gender inequality, I teach that sometimes and I argue the point that many women have the majority in terms of demographic positions and yet have a gender gap that has been consistent. Why do you allow it to happen? I ask those questions. I do not get good answers.

When it comes to places like Detroit, which has a majority black city, I asked questions again. Why is it that a majority black city that the police force for example is underrepresented when it comes to African Americans? Why do you let it happen? So, I ask questions about those kinds of things. The consciousness is not always there. The challenge is to move these students from the position of where they are to the position of consciousness where they take action when they find out there is a problem. Sometimes there are problems within their community that they just do not know about. When they find out, they do not always take the action. That is what I do. I am one of those teachers that like students to do something about it once they have a problem.

MM: Do you think that there is way for students to take action within the MSU community?

JD: During my time here, from 1972 and on, we had a time where students took over the administration building because things were not what they should have been. They did not have enough African American on the faculty; they did not have enough Latinos on the faculty here. They did not like it, so they went to the Board of Trustees and essentially took over the building, demanded that the university change, and increase the number of faculty. The faculty increased after that. Once the pressure is off the administration, things go back to like the way they were before.

In other words, students have a lot of influence. If they do not protest and do not take action, few things happen. I contribute the increase in faculty representation of people of color to students who demanded that we had more members of the group that reflect their own identity. That is why we got it. Students can do a lot more. What I find more recently, however, is that students do not tend to take those kinds of actions. They accept more than they should, so you do not get some of those activities here at Michigan State. Some of the other universities have been a bit more active than this, but we do not have much of it here.

For some reason, it is not what it used to be. I do not see the students as active as I would like them to be in order to change things. That is one of the things that I am concerned about. I try to motivate them to have them do more, but that has not happened. When I was a student at



University of Pittsburg years ago, we took over the computer center at the time to make sure they do some things that should do. Those were the kinds of things that I would like to see more of in terms of students' activities.

MM: You have taught in California and Pennsylvania. Were your students or teaching experiences different at MSU?

JD: Students are similar. I would not say they are different from a geographical standpoint as much as they are different from a kind of historical standpoint. In other words, during the times I was a student myself, things were happening in the country as a whole that made students a bit more active. The Vietnam War, for example, students were opposed to. You had Kent State, for example, a place where students were shot to death because they were protesting the war. So, it was a time when things were happening and students were actively engaged in things.

More recently, we have not found that as much as we should then. It was more or less the time than it was the place that it was happening. So, those times resulted in students being a bit more active than they would have been. Now we got to more recently, you had the election last year 2016. Young people surprisingly, in that so-called young age, most of those white individuals who are young voted for Donald Trump. That would not have happened years ago. It just would not have happened with the ideas of Donald Trump, young people, Michigan State students, would not happen. So, those are the kinds of things I am talking about in an historical standpoint. Students have become a bit more less progressive than they used to be when it comes to social justice and inequality.

We have increasing inequality today in this country yet you do not get much activity from students to address it or to try to vote for people who want to reduce inequality. You do not get that. Those are the kinds of things I was talking about. I was hoping I would get students, given their age, who would be more progressive than I am. I have not seen students over the years as progressive as I am. I have gotten older, but they have gotten more conservative. That is a strange situation that I did not expect to happen. Usually, the older people are a bit more conservative than the younger people are. I do not find that.

I find that students are more conservative now than they used to be. I wonder why that is the case. I am not clear as to why that happens. I am concerned about it because if they are going to be that conservative and less progressive, then I do not think we will have as much social change when it comes to issues like inequality, gender issues that exists, disrespect for women. Those things should not happen now, but they do. I was hoping we would get more progress with that. I am depending on students to address those things, but I cannot, I am not sure they will, given their own ideas.

MM: Do you think there has been change in MSU faculty?

JD: The faculty, I have not over the years seen as much change as I would like. When I got here back in 1972, it was overwhelmingly white and male at the time. White women have been joining the faculty in increasing numbers over the years. They have become a bit more representative throughout the campus, including geography; we have several white women now that we did not have before. That is a change, a good change.

What we have not done effectively has been bringing in people of color on the faculty. We have been underrepresented in those areas, except for Asian faculty members, they have increased quite a bit and in most places including geography. Outside of the Asian population, we have not increased the faculty very much. Latino faculty, for example, is underrepresented grossly; African American faculty members still underrepresented grossly.

Throughout my whole career being here, I have struggled to get those things changed. I have talked to administration; I have talked to the dean and tried to have them understand how to change that. So, those are the areas that need to be improved. We do not have the faculty that reflects the racial ethnic diversity of the state of Michigan; it is underrepresented. Those are issues that causes let me say, conflict and concern. Especially, among students, who may not have anybody who reflects their own views in terms of racial composition and so forth.

What were your first impressions of MSU?

JD: Michigan State University was a big campus when I arrived. Well organized, well laid out, the president who laid it years ago did an effective job of that. I was impressed by the size, large student body, which was impressive, and several departments. A big campus, it was one of the major institutions, part of the big ten. I was impressed by the lack of so-called elitism given this land grant. Michigan State really believes in it. My interpretation of that is it was designed to accommodate the working classes instead of the elite. That was encouraging to me because that was the kind of institution I preferred to work in.

One that is concerned with that group of people as opposed to just the upper classes like some of the private institutions do. This one was not that. I think I would feel more comfortable in a place like this than the other elitist ones: the Harvard, Princeton, and Yale. So, that was encouraging to me; I found that people interacted in such a way that they had some kind of concerns about these issues. When a faculty member takes a job here, they are expected to, if they work hard and do what they should do, get their ten-year appointment and so forth as opposed to places like Harvard and Yale, who have no intention of keeping them anywhere. They just bring them in; let them stay for a few years; then, turn them out. That has been their process. We do not do that here, so I think that is something encouraging. You are expected to get tenure here if you do what you should do, not expected to get turned out.

[End of interview]

Transcribed by: *Mileena McDonald, 2/14/18*