Brittney Garza: So, tell us how you got to UT Austin. What was it like for your first years there?

Pamiel Johnson Gaskin: Okay, that's a lot of questions, but the way I got there is quite interesting. I didn't want to go there. I was accepted at the University of Pennsylvania in a writing program, but my dad told me I was going to the University of Texas. I said, "Well, I didn't apply there." He said, "Well, you're going to." So I did. Because in those days you didn't really question your parents. You did what they said. And I said, "I'll apply, but I'm not going." And he said, "Well, let me tell you why you're going. When I tell you why you're going we're not going to discuss it anymore." I said, "Okay." He said, "In 1946, your mother and I were helping organize the NAACP in Texas. We were in Austin for an organizational meeting. Your mom was pregnant. We walked every day. So, we walked up Congress Ave, and we walked onto the campus of the university. Out of nowhere, came a police officer with a gun pointed at your mother's stomach, and said, "Niggers are not allowed on this campus." And he kept the gun pointed at us until we got off campus."

He said, "When I got off campus, I put my hand on your mother's belly, and I said, "This baby is going to this school."

Oh my gosh!

"So the baby was you, and you're going."

Oh, that's incredible!

That's how I came to go to the University of Texas. So, he prepared me because this was in 1965. The university had only been open undergraduate to black students since '56. So it wasn't even ten years and there weren't maybe a hundred black students out of 38,000. Dorms weren't integrated. We stayed in... do you all know where the communications school is?

Yeah.

Right now on Whitis Ave?

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

At that site were two framed houses. Whitis Co-op and Almetris Co-op were right there and all the black female undergraduates stayed in one of those two houses. So, you know, long story short, that's how I got there. I started. I didn't want to be there. I will confess I had a headache the entire three and a half years that I was there. (laughter) But, I came to love it afterward because of the experience. The experience showed me some more about myself than it did other people. So, my brother followed me. He was seven years younger, but he
went to the University. My sister, who was between us, went to the University of Michigan. But, you know, I decided I would major in English because my favorite teacher in high school was an English major and she took us to all sorts... she took us to the Alley Theater and, you know, she exposed us to a lot of things.

BG: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

PJG And I like to write. And writing was my passion. So I wrote little poems and you know, little short stories. I’d make up stuff, and so I wanted to be a writer. And, that’s why I wanted to go to the University of Pennsylvania. They had probably at that time one of the best writing schools in the country and I was fortunate enough to get in. They accepted my portfolio of work and admitted me to that program. So, you know, I felt like I gave up a lot to go to the University of Texas and you know, I listen to kids who, you know, "If I don’t get into UT I’m going to die," you know. And you would watch the sorority girls and if they didn’t get in their chosen Phi Gamma Chi, "Oh! I’m just going to pack it up and go!", and I’m like, "Ugh!" (laughter) "You want to be here?" Now I did have an English professor -- I don’t remember his name, but it was American Literature and he called the University the Sorbonne of the Southwest.

BG: The what?

PJG The Sorbonne of the Southwest. And we just kind of all would all just sit there and go... ?

BG: Yeah.

PJG You know? Sure. But anyway, so my first years were great. My first couple of years were... I joined a sorority. I joined Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority. I pledged that my second semester. Made some lifelong friends. We raised a lot of hell though. We were politically and socially active.

BG: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

PJG Our graduate advisor in the sorority was a woman named Wilhelmina Delco. Now if you’ve been in Austin anytime, you’ve probably seen the Delco Center for this...

BG: Yes

PJG There’s a lot of stuff named after her. She was the first African-American elected to the school board in Austin. I had the privilege of working in her campaign. She taught us how to campaign...

BG: Yeah
... and that was one of our sorority projects that we worked on her campaign to help her get elected. We learned a lot about being politically active. We also used to go and protest at the movie theater on the Drag. We'd line up, we'd get to the window, and she'd say, "You know we can't sell you a ticket." And we'd say, "Okay," and we'd go back and get in line and this would just go on and on. So we used to, you know, we did a lot of that stuff. But my favorite activist thing that we did... We went to see Darrell Royal to ask him when he was going to recruit some African American football players, and he put his feet up on the desk and said, "As long as the alumni don't want niggers, I won't be recruiting any." And we said, "Okay, we'll see you at the game Saturday." So we left, and we went and made us some signs and we went to the game. And this is the only one that I attended inside the whole time I was there... inside Memorial Stadium.

BG: Mm-hmm (affirmative)  

PJG We went to this game... I don't even know who was playing...  

BG: Yeah.  

PJG And we had made our little signs and we had them rolled up and we spotted where the TV cameras were. Because they were always near the student section. And at an opportune moment, we held up our signs, and one of them said, "Bevo needs soul!"

BG: Yeah.  

PJG And the other one said, "Orange and White needs Black." And the Texas Rangers came and escorted fourteen of us out of the stadium. They literally put us out of the stadium. So, that was my favorite.

BG: That's awesome!  

PJG (Laughter) It was just great, you know? Let's see, I went to jail once, about six of us went to jail for a protest at the barber shop. It was a barber shop on the Drag. They wouldn't cut black guys' hair.

BG: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-  

PJG So we went up there and anyways, that was our badge of honor.  

BG: Yeah.  

PJG But, you know, those were the types of things that we did. But we also did... we worked with our sorority sisters at Huston-Tillotson and we did a breakfast program for low income children. Every Saturday we would serve... make, prepare, and serve breakfast. And sometimes we paid for the eggs and bacon
and everything else out of our pockets. Which we didn't have money out of our pockets, but you know, you share what you have.

BG: Yeah.

PJG But we would have, you know, breakfast for them at a community center over in East Austin, or usually, actually it was at Wesley United Methodist Church. We would do it there. So, you know, we thought we were doing some good work in the community. And that was satisfactory for us.

BG: Yeah.

PJG Mrs. Almetris Marsh Duren was our house mother and she was like a mom to us.

BG: Yeah.

PJG One of the terrible experiences, the worst experience I had, well, let me back up. Before I went my dad took me here to Rev. William Lawson. I don't know if you all have heard of him. He was the Senior Pastor at Miller Avenue Baptist Church, which is a historic Baptist church here. Because my dad was involved in the Civil Rights Movement, he knew all these people. And we lived in [inaudible 00:10:05], which was about 40 miles from here.

BG: Yeah.

PJG But he and Rev. Lawson were friends and you know, Rev. Lawson was involved in the NAACP and all of this. Well, he used to teach non-violence classes to students who would go sit in at the lunch counters and all of this. So my daddy took me and put me before I went to the university. He enrolled me in Rev. Lawson's class on non-violent protests. And I'm like, "Ugh!" He said, "Well you have a bad temper, so I'm sending you up there to school and I don't intend you get put out of school because you couldn't control yourself." That's probably the best thing that ever happened to me. And I went unwillingly, but I went. And you know, they were pushing us in this training, and you know calling 'nigger, nigger, nigger', and I'm like, "Nobody gonna do that to me!" Because, see back then, we lived in segregated communities.

BG: Yeah.

PJG So I was a cherished child. I was a smart little girl. At church, "Oh, she's going to do great things!". You know, I was the apple of my daddy's eye, so who's going to say something mean to me?

BG: Right.
PJG: You know? Because I had gone to black schools and black church, and you know my life was in the black community. I had no real interactions with people of other colors. So he sent me to this and one of the things he taught us was keep your cool. Maintain your composure, and remember that the people who do these things are bullies.

BG: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

PJG: And the thing that a bully fears the most is another bully. So if someone gets in your face you get in their face. You don't touch them [crosstalk 00:12:19], but...

BG: Right.

PJG: If they call you a nigger, you just say loud, "Get out of my way!"

BG: Yeah.

PJG: They'll do it.

BG: Right.

PJG: So, okay. Well, I've been at UT three weeks coming out of Vance Hall, which is where the English department was. I don't know where it is now. But, coming out of Vance Hall and this white girl came up and jumped in my face, spit on me. So I got spit coming down the side of my face...

BG: Yeah.

PJG: And she says, "You niggers need to go back to Africa! Why do you want to be here with us?" I thought about that, and I was holding some books...

BG: Yeah.

PJG: And I said, "Get out of my face!" And she did...

BG: Yeah.

PJG: And it was just enough for me to start walking. Well, the other thing he taught us was that if someone spits on you, your instinct is to do this.

BG: Right.

PJG: He said that acknowledges the act. The thing that they hate is for us not to acknowledge a hateful act. So here I am with this spit and my knees are doing this...

BG: Yeah.
And you know what Vance Hall is, so I had to come up those old steps and across the mall headed toward Whitis Avenue. Which, you know, it's a nice little walk.

BG: Yeah.

I got to where the chemistry building was.

BG: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Which was near the academic center, and I couldn't go any further. My legs wouldn't take me. I was just overcome and I slid, I leaned against a wall, and I slid down and I was sitting on the ground just boo-hooing. No one ever talked to me or called me that word to my face. You know? Now I knew that folks did that, but I was shielded from it. So I bet I sat there for 15 minutes crying and not one person stopped to say, "Are you OK?" That was the tragedy of it. Not that I sat there and cried, but that nobody, not one single soul, "Are you okay?"

BG: Yeah.

So I get to Almetris co-op and Miss Duren hugs me and [inaudible 00:15:24] oh baby, you know, and I said, "I'm gonna call my daddy." (laughter) So I called home collect. I said, "You have to come get me. I can't go to school." And he said, "What happened?" and I told him. My dad was a labor union organizer.

BG: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

He was a tough guy. He took no crap from anybody including his children. Okay? I said, "Daddy, I can't." He said, "She spit on you?" I said, "Yeah.". He said, "Well you know what? This is probably the worst thing that's going to happen to you the whole time you're going to be there."

BG: Yeah

He said, "Suck it up." (laughter) And I'm like, "Ahhhh!" I hung up the phone. The rest is history. And it actually was the worst thing that happened to me the whole time that I was there. But, you know, that was it. But you know, high points? I didn't go back. Something that I wish I had done, but I didn't. I refused to go back for my graduation because we didn't have mid-term graduations.

BG: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

So I completed all of my requirements...

BG: Yeah.
In the fall semester of '68 and my degree says January 1969, but we didn't have mid-year graduations.

And I just didn't want to go back to a tin commencement. I remember we were sitting at my brother's commencement in 1976 and my dad says, "Hmmm, look at this, Allen Johnson the Third. Magna Cum Laude. How did you graduate?" (laughter) I said, "[inaudible 00:17:26]" You know, and I'm like, "But does it matter? Because he doesn't have a shiny star on his degree either." (laughter) So, you know, but anyway. I do regret not going back for my commencement.

Talking about the moment when you were coming out of Vance Hall, do you think that was kind of pivotal for you in like getting involved in like activism and stuff like that?

Yes,

Because I'd only been there three weeks.

And I was still trying to find my way to a building called the BEB.

You know, I don't know if you all know about that. But it's the Business Economics Building, and it's where the business school used to be. But they had a big auditorium and I took a history class with Lynda Bird Johnson and her secret service were there in class and she had a whole row to herself. And her name was Lynda Johnson and my name was Pam Johnson and we had to sit alphabetically. So guess what? She had a row, and then I was the next person.

So one day I told her. I said, "Well, hello cousin!" (laughter) We got to know the Secret Service agents, and you know, it was real cool!

And she was really a nice chick. But I was still at that point... you asked me was that a turning point?... Yes it was. It inspired my activism. I kind of grew up in activism, but I was never...

You'd never been exposed...

Right. I mean I went to my share of demonstrations and stuff.
PJG: But I was never involved to the point of planning and executing.

BG: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

PJG: That, oh yeah, I said, "Something's got to change because we are people and we are here." There were only I thing, the entire time I was there, there were never more than 125 African Americans. And that's undergraduate and graduate.

BG: Yeah.

PJG: So, we used to have a little saying that if you see a black person walking across campus you better speak to them, because you may not see another one for two weeks.

BG: Yeah

PJG: (Laughter)

BG: That's crazy!

PJG: And, you know, now I'll go back and it's a great melting pot.

BG: Yeah. So you rushed Alpha Kappa Alpha? Is that what it was?

PJG: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

BG: I didn't know, so how long has that been on campus when you were there?

PJG: That chapter was chartered in 1959. 60 years ago on May 14.

BG: So it was still fairly new when you were there?

PJG: Yeah.

BG: Yeah.

PJG: Well, the chapter was.

BG: Mm-hmm (affirmative)- Right.

PJG: The sorority itself dates back to 1908.

BG: Yeah.

PJG: Yeah.
So we were the first African American sorority founded at Howard University. But yeah, it and, we were the first African American sorority at UT.

We had talked about in class, just, you know there was really no way for African American students to really get involved in any way.

Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

In any social aspect...

Right, and that was it.

Right.

And that was it.

And we were saying the sororities never allowed any black people in...

Right.

To have that for you, was that like...

It was great. It was great because, again, my teachers in high school, most of the teachers that I admired the most were members of Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority. They gave me a scholarship.

That's awesome.

And now don't laugh, don't cry when I tell you this, but I got a $500 scholarship. A $500 scholarship paid my tuition and fees for two years.

That's crazy! Oh my gosh!

Yeah! (laughter)

Wow!

Our tuition was like $127, $128 a semester.

Wow!

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. But that's how, and I admired those ladies and wanted to be like them, so that's why I rushed AKA.

Mm-hmm (affirmative)-
And I have been a member for 53 years. So hopefully, well we'll be celebrating our sixtieth year on campus...

... this year. I think in September.

So being in that sorority, that's really where you got involved in activism?

Well, yeah. We also started the Negro Action Club. It's been so long... it was the Negro Action something... I can't remember. But we started that. Rodney Griffin who started at the same time I did. We were in the same class. Linda Jann Lewis was one of my sorority line sisters. Linda went on to be the, when Bob Bullock was lieutenant governor, she was his chief of staff. So a lot of us just kind of stayed active.

But yeah, a lot of that came from being in the sororities and in the communities. But also just because we all lived together and played together. We were at the church together. We didn't have cars. We used to walk across Interregional to go to church on Sunday, but we were all thin! No fat on us. So, yep, that was it!

We also had watched a video in class about the protest with the movie theater on the Drag. We watched a bunch, you know, just interviewing people who started those protests and that were there for those. You said that you had joined those...

... as well. Did you enjoy that? Was that fun? Because those videos were so cool!

It was great! (laughter)

Yeah. Yeah.

We had a ball! One of the girls, Cheryl Griffin...

... goes to church with me now. She lives here. Her brother Rodney, as I said, Cheryl was older than we were. So Cheryl was the one whose name is on the lawsuit that desegregated the dormitories.

Oh really?

Mm-hmm (affirmative).
BG: That's awesome!

PJG Now Cheryl never pledged a sorority.

BG: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

PJG But she was the big sister that we all looked up to. You know, if she said, "We're going downtown to Woolworth's to sit at the counter," we said, "Okay, yes ma'am."

BG: That's very cool.

Sasha Davy: So did you live on campus when you were at UT?

PJG Mm-hmm (affirmative).

SD: But there weren't many African Americans like living on campus, It was just kind of like just you by yourself?

PJG We were in these two white framed houses. There were like 12 in one and 20 girls in the other. And then Grace Hall had just desegregated and I think there were two girls in Grace Hall. Shirley Tennyson and somebody else. Then the next year '66, everything was open. So we had a lot of folks who lived in Ken Sullivan. We had, I said a lot, five or six. Let's see. I had a cousin who came in '66, Sharon, and she lived in the dorm that didn't have air conditioning, but it was over on the same side of Whitis as Kinsolving. But we were all there and there wasn't that many of us. Remember, 125 grads, undergrads, men, and women. So at any given time there were more women than men, so there were probably 75 women and 25 or 30 men.

SD: Yeah.

PJG So, Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, they had a house. They had a frat house. So a lot of those guys lived there. So guys that weren't in that frat, because it was the only one, lived in the old athletic dormitory. Not the new athletic, the old athletic dormitory. It was an old Army barracks.

SD: So since there were so few African American students, how did you guys get together to go protest?

PJG Oh, well we were together every day. Understand this. We got called nigger everyday by somebody. A car driving by. One of our big sisters, Betty Devereux, who was a brilliant mathematician, came home from the first day of class (when I was a freshman she was a sophomore), and was told she had to change... the professor told her he wanted to see her after class. She was the only black person in the class. He said, "Well you're going to have to change classes because I don't teach niggers. And they can't do anything to me because I'm
tenured." Which was true. This was affecting her ability to graduate, you know? We had these, you know folks today talk about micro-aggressions? We had macro-aggressions.

SD: Yeah.

PJG Multiple times a day, every day. So you ask how did we get together? Everybody came to our Almetris co-op, men and women, and we sat in that living room and we were a family.

SD: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

PJG And we bolstered each other up. We cried, we laughed, we told jokes. So I mean we didn't come together to say specifically, "On Tuesday we're going to plan our protest." No.

SD: Yeah.

PJG The protests grew out of our shared experiences. So, like I had an English teacher who, we had the Dean of the School of Liberal Arts, College of Arts and Sciences, was a man named John Silber. Dean Silber went on to become president of Boston University...

SD: Wow.

PJG ... when he left UT, but he was Dean of Arts and Sciences. I had a job on campus, I worked in his office. I had an English class. And all we had to do was five papers and our final paper counted for fifty percent.

SD: I'm so sorry, I'm going to have to interrupt. Do you want to come inside so we can like, hear better?

PJG Sure.