

Dear Future Friars Oral History Interview

Interview Subject: Thomas S. Walters Jr.

Interviewer: Nahyr Morales Lugo

Date: January 26, 2023

Time: 2:54pm

Transcript:

Nahyr Morales Lugo 00:00

Hello, this is an interview for Dear Future Friars, Providence College's project to interview alumni and document their experience. Today is January 26, 2023, at 2:54pm. My name is Nahyr Morales Lugo, and I'll be conducting the interview today. Can you please state your full name and your graduation year?

Thomas S. Walters Jr. 00:28

My full name is Thomas S. Walters Jr. I graduated in 1974. But since I had to do another half a semester, I came back in January. And I left, I finished all my courses in 1975. But my graduation class was 1974.

Nahyr Morales Lugo 00:58

Where are you from? And where do you currently live?

Thomas S. Walters Jr. 01:02

I'm from Washington, D.C., Southeast. I live now in Providence, Rhode Island. No. I live now in Cranston, Rhode Island. I just moved recently.

Nahyr Morales Lugo 01:19

And what did you study at Providence College, your major and your minor.

Thomas S. Walters Jr. 01:25

I studied social work. I came thinking that I was going to study sociology. And Sister Straub was the professor, and she explained to me that I had the wrong concept of what social work was, versus sociology, the study of societies. So I immediately changed my, my major to social work. And I also took a lot of classes in ethics and philosophy. I really enjoyed going to school, and being able to go into different classes. Back then you could do that. And I liked philosophy. I like criminology. And everything was new to me. So when you asked me what was my major, my minor I would have said, Providence College. I came here under the guidance of Father Morris, Joe Mulaney, and Dave Gavitt. I was recruited by Mulaney and Gavitt. And when I got to Rhode Island, when I got to this place, Providence, I noticed that Joe Mulaney had gone and left his job and went with the Los Angeles Lakers. He was the head coach, I was like oh man. I came in thinking I'm just on a basketball scholarship. But later on, after maybe about, I'd say about a month. You know, because I was had to come in the summertime to take three courses. A college writing course. I had to take Latin. No. Was it Latin? No. It was, it was philosophy. No. It was logic. That's what it was. I gotta tell you this too, because I'm a little older than you guys. I'm 72. And when you get to that age, that's when you realize that you really needed a wife, somebody that can help you remember things that you that you forget, boom, just like that. So I'm going to try to remember some of the things that happened along the way. I didn't prepare anything that I thought that I should bring. I did prepare stuff at home, but I wiped it off the map because I didn't want to engage in subjects that could be critical of someone else. So I just told myself I will just talk

about me, myself and how I came to Providence, Rhode Island and Providence College. And the things that were new to me was the snow. I don't expect this much snow. And the Providence police were new because they were different from Washington, DC police and here it at a certain time and night must be one o'clock in the morning. New cars are on the street. Well, I grew up cars were always parked on the street. And here they have no alleys. With a trash man come and pick up the trash. And people have the dogs in the bag to protect their back doors. So everything was really kind of different for me. And what I really was amazed at was the projects. See when I first got here, it was no women. It's all guys. And most of them were all white. So I've asked them, where's where's the ghetto? Where do Black people live? They said Chad Brown, and I said, well where's Chad Brown? Said go out the door, go out the gate and make a left turn to just keep straight. So I walked out the gate one night, I'm gonna go down and see what's going on. And I got right outside the gate car drove up on me a bunch of white kids and drinking. They're throwing beer cans at me, calling me all kinds of names. So immediately I picked up a brick. That was my favorite weapon a brick. That's what you have in the project. You pick up something that's close, so I will use bricks as my weapon. So I picked up the brick, they saw me they took off (imitates car screeching) drive down the street. I ran down they they got caught at the light (laughter). But I didn't I didn't smash them. Because I knew it was just a bunch of white kids, you know, they really wasn't no threat to me. And I have six kids. Kyla, Jocelyn, and Tommy Boy, Jason, Rubin, and Joey. My daughter, Kyla Walters is an alumna here at Providence College. She was the first one to come here. And then my daughter and my other daughter, Jocelyn. She didn't want to go to the same school. So she ended up - I took her to Washington, DC, where my my high school coach was John Thompson at Georgetown. And we could have got her in, but she didn't want to, she wanted to take her subject. Stubborn. I was like, come on, you could get into Georgetown, come on, you gotta you want to go. She said nah dad I ain't going. I was like a'right so she ended up going to Boston College. And my boys, Jason, he went to Carnegie Mellon. You know, he doesn't talk much, but his brain is always ticking. And my other kids, one went to Roanoke, Virginia, and one went to URI. And one went to Johnson and Wales. So I feel fortunate and blessed to be able to get my kids into school, college and show them that education is the only way you can survive here in America. If you don't have an education in America, you're going to be sleeping on the street. You're going to be robbing Peter to pay Paul. And I used to bring them up to Providence College when they were young. And they would go to the gym, they would run all around and let them loose. They go down to the handball courts. We didn't have a swimming pool back then. But they will come and say Dad, oh, we like this place. We'd like to we'd like to come here. I said, Well, you can come here but you got to do good in school first. They just don't let you in. And you know, cuz they saw this is a big, huge playground. No pitbulls, no broken glass. You know, not like walking up and down Broad Street at that time. So they, they liked Providence College, they liked college. And that's one of the things that I was fortunate to, to give them an understanding that it's not just like in like the school that you will go into like books and teachers that want to paddle your hand. You can have fun in college. And I had a lot of fun here. This is like my second home. And that's why I thought I'd come and do this talk. And tell the people that get a chance to, to hear this and see this podcast that I enjoyed the time I was here at Providence College. And this was a time doing Burn Baby Burn. Every city was on fire. There was disruption. It was police beaten up people with the dogs and fire hoses and all that Martin Luther King, Malcolm X. All of that I came through. And I was up here with all these white people, right? And my one of my earliest friends was this guy named Bill Nemo from Newport. He's passed on but he was a good guy. He, he would well, I wouldn't let nobody talk down to me in the first place. But Bill was like over top of me. Like he was taking things personal. That was a deep they take it easy, man. They didn't mean that. And my other best friend was Ernie Degorio, Ernie D. And I'm on the team. We had like, five and five, five white guys, five Black guys. Well, must have been six and six. But we all got along like a family we just blended. Plus we had Marvin Barnes. And when I first got here the Black players said, Tom. Ernie D. He's not that good, man. Punch him out, beat him up, man. Get him. I said, Wait a minute, man. You got to understand one thing. You see these long shots that he's making. He's making 'em I said I'm in his ass, but he's making the shots. You see these passes that he's throwing. He's making those passes, man. And I'm doing everything I can do. I said, man, if you don't like it, you can check him. They were or they didn't want to check him. Because, you know, I went back

and told him. I went right back and told him I said, Ernie man, these guys want me to punch you out but I'm not doing that man. You're good player. He said, yeah, you a good player too, we're both gonna make the NBA. I was like, yeah, this is my guy, man. He took me up on the hill. In the Italian parts of town his mother sent us up there to, to, to get groceries one day. He took me in his house and he said, Tom, come on in. You're coming into my house. Right? But I want you to do one thing for me. I said, what's that? He said don't, don't, don't try to go out with my sisters man. Because he knew I was from the streets and I could talk them into it. He said, nah, don't do that to them now. That's okay. Right. We get the paper from his mother a little this paper about this big. We go up on the hill. We didn't go to no front doors. And see no money changed. Go in there, come out with two big bags. Both of us we had our arms full. We go up to near Caserta's pizza, he says Tom put the bags in the car. I gotta go see my father. I said Okay, we can do that. Go into this club, had no doors and had no windows and one door. Going in the place is pitch dark. I'm like what the heck? There's guys playin' cards is father and some of his friends. They're all sitting in the dark playing cards. And I hear a voice says, Ernie, who's that? He said he's on the team. The voice says, Ernie, who's that? He said you know, he's a good guy you know. Another voice Ernie, who's that? He said he's my goombah [sic]. I say to myself, Ernie done call me some kind of name. We get outside I said Ernie, those guys in there kept asking me who I was, and at the end, you told him I was a goombah [sic]. I said what is a goombah [sic]? He said friends for life Tom. At then my heart, my face was stretched, and I just I just loved Ernie for taking me in to his heart into his home into a neighborhood that wasn't likable, because of the time that it was Blacks against whites. Blacks up here against Italians. It wasn't like, you know, back where I was, you know, it was the only white people we saw were the police, the firemen, and the mailman. That was it. But here there was a camaraderie of families that respected law and order. There was no pocketbooks getting snatched, there was no broken glass, no cars getting broken, because they actually policed their neighborhood. And that was one of the reasons I decided to raise a family here. Because as I say, when I came here, it was brand new. I never knew there was such a thing as Black Indians and Narragansetts. I never knew that. And, and I never knew of there was people call Cape Verdeans. I never knew that either. And when I began to find out and branch out into Rhode Island, I found out that they were a multicultural state. And you didn't, you don't know that when you first get here cuz [sic] you just see just white people, but that's not what this state is. And then you find out later on, it's a real shocker they're all related. You say, wait a minute. See, yeah I've got white people in my family (laughter). You kidding me? And look, there's my aunt here's my uncle [unknown]. Oh, yeah, you do. And that's on both sides. So I was able to integrate myself into a culture where the animosity was less than what I came from. And that's the part of Rhode Island that doesn't get shown it doesn't get talked about. You know, on the basketball game, you see the school. But they don't talk about the diversity. They don't talk about the priests that were here, now gone Father Heath and Father Morris, and Dr. Hamlin. And there were so many priests and, and professors here that that looked out for students, Black and white. Because my class was the largest class of Black people that had ever came to Providence College. 17 of us all came from mostly big cities, Boston, New York, Washington, Norfolk, Virginia. And Father Morris and Dr. Hamlin and now you have Wanda. She was a student when the girls came, all the girls came. And they were, they were all Black. They were came on the Martin Luther King scholarship program. And my scholarship was changed from basketball scholarship to a Martin Luther King scholarship, because the first year as a freshman freshman couldn't play. And Father Morris wanted me to make sure I studied and so I wouldn't flunk out. And so I didn't play on the team. I couldn't go to practices. I could watch 'em, but I couldn't go participate. So that's what I did. I watched, but I practiced on my own after the gym, I practiced. Every morning, I would go to Dave Gavitt's office with Ernie. We wait for him to come to work, so that we could get into his office and get the magazines. He had basketball magazines that was sent to him, right? So we would go in and read all of his magazines, look at them and try to try to you thought we want to take them out. But he was telling us right off. Don't take none of the magazines. He said okay, you guys got to get out of here. Now. We were like slow. He said one more thing, go to class. He says I don't want to hear that you guys was in the gym. Now get out of here and go to class. And I was like, yeah he ain't taking no talking back so we got to go. And that's how it was for me here. How long have you want me to talking? (laughter) I told you we gotta have a signal.

Nahyr Morales Lugo 18:09

Everything that you were talking about, basically, like not completely covered all the questions, but because you were covering some of them. I just let you talk (laughter).

Thomas S. Walters Jr. 18:18

Oh, good. Okay. I know that. There's a lot of stories about the prison, a lot of stories about basketball, here and my new found home Rhode Island. That will be interesting. And uh -

Nahyr Morales Lugo 18:38

I have some questions.

Thomas S. Walters Jr. 18:40

Sure. Let's get to 'em.

Nahyr Morales Lugo 18:41

Alrighty. So the first one is what did being a POC college student mean to you?

Thomas S. Walters Jr. 18:48

Here in Providence?

Nahyr Morales Lugo 18:49

Yes, as a college student, what did that mean to you?

Thomas S. Walters Jr. 18:53

It was I was very engrossed with the fact that once I was in social work, the professors started talking about Washington DC, and the ghettos. So, I would just close my book. And they would give us these little novels to read. And I come back the next day and say, you know, I know this corner, I don't have to read this book, I can tell you something that happened in this in this area, and they would sit down and listen to what I had to say. And I, I gained their respect, and I was always honest with them if they had questions. When I came to Providence College, you know, I had these kind of life stories. And logic was new to me, but it gave me an idea of how to think and what was the grand scale. I had a teacher who was teaching Western Civ. Matthew Smith, that made us go back in history up until the present day. So, yeah, Providence College made me, a more affluent person, made me understand about right and wrong. So yeah, that's what Providence College did for me, gave me a different kind of education.

Nahyr Morales Lugo 20:22

And going along with that, in what ways did this identity influence your everyday, everyday life sorry, during your college years and continue to influence you now?

Thomas S. Walters Jr. 20:34

I got out of college, on social work degree, I needed a job. So, I looked in the papers and went downtown, and I became a business analyst at Dun and Bradstreet. And the machines, the copier machines were as big as this wall. And I had to go outside drive around to all these different neighborhoods that I didn't know where I was, and evaluate businesses, people's businesses and put on we put it on a piece of paper and send it all around the world. And, you know, I was making a fair amount of money, but I wasn't, you know, I wasn't making no money to support a family and I met this beautiful girl, Cathy Cabral [sic]. Who I married, and we moved in together and started to

raise a family. But I knew even on the salary that I was making. It would be you know, it'd be difficult, you know. So, I started to look for another employment. And that's how I ended up at the ACI at the prison as I was wanting to go in as a counselor or social worker, clinical counselor, case worker, and I was told that the officers write their own check. This is a phrase I had never never heard of. I said, what? Write their own check, what do you mean they write their own check? And the person told me, said yeah Tom they have a thing there, overtime, and they can make as much money as they want. He said, but you know, you just came out of college, so you might not want to do that. So oh, and I'm thinking to myself, they got a they got a prison up here, right? It can't be nothing like the prison, the other jails down in Washington. So, I'm gonna go in and see what it's like. I'm gonna go and it's got to be just whole bunch of white kids, right. And I took a couple of friends. We all had graduated from Providence College, Clarence Weatherspoon who passed, and another guy, Archie Lee, who also passed, and we went in there. And it was a hellhole (laughter). We was not safe. But we ended up earning the respect from the correctional officers, and the inmates and we made it out alive. After 37 years, I quit. I quit because my mother told me to quit. I wasn't going to quit. I was gonna bring my mother up here and let her live with me and continue on. And she said boy, why are you still working there? She said, you made enough money. So why are you still there? Before I can answer she said, you know what, there's only one thing they want from you now. And I was like, what is it? She said your pension? I never thought about that. Because the pension is way back in your mind when you're working. You think I got a pension, I'm okay. But you never think that you could lose it. And so, the day she passed the next day, I called him up and told him I was all done. And I was I was leaving Department of Corrections. Well, I mean, I give advice, but I'm not going back. I did. What else?

Nahyr Morales Lugo 24:03

So how did the professional connections and personal bonds that you formed at Providence College, affect your time here and you keep in contact with any of them?

Thomas S. Walters Jr. 24:18

I keep in contact through Facebook with many of the people, classes 74 classes 75. And we talk about basketball of course. PC basketball is one of my favorites. And Georgetown. I have some people in Washington, even though Georgetown was losing, they still stick by the school because of Thompson and the history.

Nahyr Morales Lugo 24:47

What do you wish you knew before you came to Providence College?

Thomas S. Walters Jr. 24:54

Before I came here, I didn't know too much enough than just how to survive on the streets before Thompson. And all that happened to me before Thompson is pretty much disappeared, not unless I look in a photo album of my past. Once I came to Rhode Island I was exposed to the beach. Washington DC, no beach, you gotta go a long way to Maryland to get a beach. And I wish I had been exposed to the ocean, boats, seafood, you know, and and uh just the wellness of people. Here, you don't see, well now you see bums on the street. But when I grew up, there was bums on the streets, cigarette butts on the street, street cleaners. They don't have that anymore. Now. Here you start to see a little bit more litter and trash. But those are the things that I wish I had known about. And I would have tried to make a difference in my life before I came here. But I came here. My mother told Father Morris, she told Dave Gavitt, she told Marvin Barnes' mother that if I was to get out of hand, they she gave them full permission to beat my butt (laughter). So, I didn't have a whole bunch of choices after that, because she told everybody. So, I was I was I was on my best behavior. And I wanted to graduate and show my mother that I had done something that not too many people in our family had done. And that's what I I didn't know until I got here on this journey that I could actually get through this. Because a lot of times I wanted to go home. I ate, what was it, Thanksgiving dinner at Dave Gavitt's house because I couldn't fly home. It was not like wow; I didn't have no

money. And I didn't want to send, call home, and asked my mother for money every week or every month. You know, I was just, I knew better. So, I stayed here. Stayed over at Marvin Barnes' house sometimes, ate with him and his mother because I had too much... I first got here was meatballs or spaghetti. All Italian foods. And I got sick. And I couldn't eat no more, caught pneumonia. And when I first came, they didn't even told me there was an infirmary. So, I was up in my bed shakin'. One of the guys came and said, Tom, you need to go to the infirmary. I said where is that what Infirmary? They picked me up, they took me over to the infirmary. And then after that, I stayed in about two days and then I went to Marvin's mother's house, and I ate there for about four or five days. And then I was able to recoup and come back and do the things that I never knew that I would travel this route. And I thought that when I was in Washington DC, at the age of 13, 14. Most of the kids that either got shot or was in jail - Lorton Institute for boys. I knew that I was going down to Lorton. And I would have to you know, fight my way through. And because of John Thompson, we had our back. I went to the Jewish Community Center. I went to number two boys club and learned about boxing and being a gentleman. That now that word, gentlemen, being a gentleman that was only on television, Fred Astaire. That was he was a gentleman that was. I was like more like Audie Murphy or somebody like that. Uh, you know, I wanted to shoot guns and ride horses. But go ahead.

Nahyr Morales Lugo 29:39

What advice would you give current POC students especially first-generation students about navigating life at Providence College or college in general?

Thomas S. Walters Jr. 29:52

Did you say not liking college or liking College?

Nahyr Morales Lugo 29:55

About navigating life at Providence College.

Thomas S. Walters Jr. 29:58

Oh, what helped me was going to the library and studying with other students. That's what helped me. Because it's not about the books and writing the paper that you learn. You learn how to get along with other people that came from other states, other families, and other backgrounds. That's the education that Providence College like, not like a lot of other college, permit you to learn from your next-door neighbor. In the cafeteria, it wasn't so much about the classwork. But it was about community that you got to be involved in. And that's what I would tell all kids. Don't worry about the books, the A's and the B's and C's. Learn this guy's name. Learn how he is, let him know how you are, you know, that's the education. Because when you get out of here, that's what you have to live in the real world. So that's the education that Providence College affords us. Here in Rhode Island, the smallest state in the union.

Nahyr Morales Lugo 31:18

I just have one more, and it's just in general, is there anything you'd like to add about the project or your involvement in anything just to conclude.

Thomas S. Walters Jr. 31:33

It's been 50 plus years, when I came here, so this was too long. This was much too long. To hear the history that was behind me. The learning experience that the new students so get is part of the education of being at Providence College. I came here there was no towering Slavin there was no which call it a community center. There was no exercise place, there was no, the library was one building. And late at night, when everything will close on the outside of the campus. There was a food truck that used to come called Harmons. He used to sell hot dogs and sandwiches. And the line would be at 40 people all night long until he sold out. Yeah, we didn't have no place to

eat. There were no cafe cafeterias, you can only go to Brad's so long, no nightclub, okay, and they only serve beer. You know, they serve some sandwiches, but it was not enough to you know, to, to make you get through the night and you were studying all night. So most kids will go to the cafeteria, bring a jar, fill the jar up with the juice, put it in their bag, break day food off, make sandwiches, put it in their bag. Eat as much as they could, and then go back to the room. Because there was no more getting food and not enough to drink. You know, after the cafeteria was closed. So you know all your kids out there or I won't call you kids. Because you're way past being a kid. Pay attention to your next door neighbor. That's all I can tell you pay attention, man because it's your world. And it's not going to be sorry, if you go down. No one's gonna be sorry. It's gonna be you. Next question. That's it. Yes. Thank you.