

## Dear Future Friars Oral History Interview

Interview Subject: Mallory (Mal) DeWitt Davis

Interviewer: Nahyr Morales Lugo

Date: April 17, 2023

Time: 12:44pm

### 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 April 17th, 2023 and it is 12:44pm. My name is Nahyr Morales Lugo, the interviewer. Now we're gonna go on to the interview. Can you please introduce yourself stating your full name and graduation year?

**Mal Davis** 00:30

Mallory Dewitt Davis, most people call me Mal. I am a 1981 Graduate.

**Nahyr Morales Lugo** 00:38

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

**Mal Davis** 00:41

I am from Norfolk, Virginia. And I currently live in Providence, Rhode Island.

**Nahyr Morales Lugo** 00:48

What did you study at Providence College, your major and your minor?

**Mal Davis** 00:53

Math, Computer Science. Psychology was probably the main minor but there were a few others.

**Nahyr Morales Lugo** 01:01

And now we're going to talk about your PC experience. What did being a POC college student mean to you?

**Mal Davis** 01:13

That's an interesting question. I don't know that it meant anything special to me, it was certainly an interesting time in New England to come to a place where you're only one of 40 out of about 4000 students. So that was kind of a culture shock. I don't know what I could add, I don't know that it meant anything special to me at that point in time.

**Nahyr Morales Lugo** 01:48

In what ways did this identity influence your everyday life during your college years and continue to influence you now?

**Mal Davis** 01:58

Well, in these United States, and my father taught me this, is that I have to understand that I have to be twice as good. And I still subscribe to that belief in this day. I also have to carry myself in a certain way on majority campus as not - how do I want to describe this? well - not to bring bad light. That's probably the best way to describe it.

**Nahyr Morales Lugo** 02:31

What activities, organizations, or clubs were you involved in on campus?

**Mal Davis** 02:39

I was the rep from the Afro-AM Society. To Student Congress, there was no BMSA or any of that back then, it was just the Afro-AM society. And later on, I became president. I was at WDOM. And then when I got hurt on the basketball team, this is my amusing part of it, Mrs. Burt, late Helen Burt, came up to me and said, well, you're on crutches, you're not doing anything, I see you're working at WDOM, why don't you get my girls on the radio? And so from that I became the first voice of Lady Friars. I was ad hoc committee on resident life, food committee, and some of other things that I can't even think of right now. But I had an active PC career when it came down to that.

**Nahyr Morales Lugo** 03:42

What did your roles in these organizations mean to you? And what made you want to become involved?

**Mal Davis** 03:51

WDOM was probably the- the key one, and reason why it was a key one, again, as a person of color, coming up from an urban area, Providence still doesn't have an urban radio station. Sorry, Hot 106, you're not. All we had in those days was a 360 degree, black experience at Brown, and that was two to six on a Sunday afternoon. And over here at PC from 9pm to 2am. So I fell into that and developed a group of DJs called PC underground when I hung up my basketball sneakers. And so the joke was that WDOM was my girlfriend. That probably was true. And so music being a second love, I spent a lot of time in the studio, doing work with that, and trying to help get the first wattage increase.

**Nahyr Morales Lugo** 04:48

What were the resources that PC offered these clubs? And did you feel that your group was supported? Why or why not?

**Mal Davis** 04:57

Our allocation from Student Congress was pretty small back in those days, maybe \$150 a year. So that's a resounding no. WDOM, we got some resources, but there was resistance in getting more money for wattage change because back in those days WDOM was just a 10-watt radio station, which doesn't carry too far. But people in the town heard it. For funny reasons, not to be said.

**Nahyr Morales Lugo** 05:45

And these are more about like your relationships on campus. So how did the professional connections and personal bonds that you formed at PC affect your time here? Do you keep in contact with any of them?

**Mal Davis 05:58**

Yes, there are some very special people here, some gone now. The late Donna McCaffrey and I had a great friendship with each other and working on resident life. Father Heath, who is a legend. We knocked heads all the time, but he actually wrote one of my best recommendations when I was applying to go to work for a three letter organization, I won't say which one. The late Frank Etosha was probably my main guy, Frank was not head of the cafeteria, but he was head of the staff that worked on the cafeteria. And he made a difficult transition, easier. Retired Dr. Rick Laboy of the math department, we stay- he's retired in Florida, we stay in contact all the time. Probably with my mentor here when I was at PC. Jackie Kiernan MacKay at that point in time was head of the counseling department, we worked on a number of projects together, especially when PC was getting some not too popular accolades for being like the top party school in the nation. So we were trying to promote non-alcoholic events. And there are a number of other ones, but those were the main ones, when it came down to it. Rick, from an academic side, and from a personal side, pretty much all the rest of them. And, you know, some are deceased, but I am thankful for having met them.

**Nahyr Morales Lugo 07:39**

That's beautiful. And I know you've touched upon some of your closer bonds. But the next question is who or what had the most - had the biggest impact on you at PC?

**Mal Davis 07:52**

Probably Frank, strangely enough, not a professor. But- but, you know, just because, and I'll say it in this way. So there were- difficulties. And after I graduated, um, I came back up here to work for the Naval Undersea Warfare Center in Newport. And I would come by, and I would visit Frank. And Frank called me one day knowing that I was in town and said, Hey, can you come by? I got a kid who is going through some of the same stuff that you went through, can you come by and see him? And so that started a mentoring relationship with a whole bunch of classes, but I don't think I would have asked it- I would have done it for anybody else but Frank. Because just- just how close we- we were. Because of him, I learned how to become a mixologist and a whole bunch of other things and work in alumni affair. So it was you know- it was a- and it was a love affair, you know- both ways. I was saddened when I found out about- about a year ago, I lost touch with him in Florida. And then I was finally told that he had passed away because he was- if my mom wants to meet him, he must have been something special in my life, which he was, but she was like, there are a couple of people I want to meet, that Frank guy that you're talking about, I need to meet him. So he got to meet her on the day of graduation.

**Nahyr Morales Lugo 09:36**

And the next question is, were there any important political events during your time at PC? And were you involved in any protests or any other forms of activism?

**Mal Davis 09:52**

I am always involved in those. I don't know that there was any big political thing that was going on when I was at PC. I will tell you though it was one of the most- I- i just got into school here. And one of the funniest things I saw was we held in '64 Hall there was a debate between Buddy Cianci and Frank Barragan, I believe his name was. And I had never seen that kind of mudslinging in my life. I was like,

Whoa, this is gonna be an interesting four years here if this is what the politics is all about here. I don't know of anything that was earth shattering at my time, from a political or protest standpoint, it was more some of the groups- classes that I helped later on, where there were protests that I came back to work with them because of some protests that went on and somewhere I'm sure in the archives there are pictures of it of- of students in the late 80s. Protests and some things that had gone down at were- weren't being had- weren't being handled, correct by the school, the NAACP was involved, the nurses alliance of Rhode Island was involved, but mainly it was me and a group of students. And- and that was hairy, because I had said to them, if you want to do this, we'll do it. And I'll put my career on the line because as a DOD employee, I'm not suppose to be political. But this one's strong enough that, you know, we'll do it. But in my- in my time here, nah, it was more about stupid stuff that was going on on campus.

**Nahyr Morales Lugo** 11:56

How did your experience at PC influence your current or former occupation?

**Mal Davis** 12:01

It was everything towards it in the simple fact that I could manipulate. And it was a fearful time here at the school. One particular unnamed Dean was afraid of the computer science program that we would lose our liberal arts look, and my whole group who we claim our computer science degree, but PC really didn't have a computer science degree at that point, we were the guinea pigs that launched it. And so we connected back with the school afterwards, to tell them the kinds of things they needed to do so that they would be able to actually solidify the computer science program, because they were- there were seven of us, which was kind of an interesting thing. And- and even at night, we had to go over to Brown to use- walk over Brown to go over and use their computer system. Because PC and inferior computer system to Brown, this is back in the days of key punch cards, you probably don't even know what that is. But you- you get a card deck. And if you got end of the line missing, it just- you not doing the programs. Much more difficult time of computer science. But yeah, that's- there was a real tight link in between those of us who were trying to get to computer science program, and most of us actually ended up going over to the scientific side of computer science. So- so yeah, and I'm thankful to not only Dr. Lavoie, but Dr. Ford, Dr. Silvestry and other members of the math department and the computer science department because the courses that we took Dr. Tattersol that we took, prepared us well for what we had to go out and do.

**Nahyr Morales Lugo** 14:15

Can you share any other successes or challenges you had while in college?

**Mal Davis** 14:27

Well, everything's not (?). So, coming to New England, some of these things we would call micro-aggressions these days. We didn't have that term back in the 70s. But I do remember one majority co-ed coming up to me, and asking me, How does it feel to be Black? And at 19, I'm not ready for that, turns out she was from Vermont. So, I had to go back and apologize to her later because she got blasted. Because where I grew up, my high school was 51% black and 49%. white. So we were there and integrated and trying to figure out, you know, how to do it. But she was actually asking a legitimate question. And then, in my freshman year and my sophomore year there were a group of ignorant students who dressed up as Klansmen. The first year in particular was particularly disturbing, because

they were voted third place for best costume, and it was actually a Dominican that was a part of the process in voting them third place. So that- that was not, you know, that was not cool at all. And then- and then there are- there were other things. We were trying to promote some alcoholic, non- alcoholic events. And we wanted the events to stay open a little bit later. But I promised- I want to be delicate how I do this. I promised, because I won't use names unless they're positive. I promised a Dominican that we would not have issues and what he said to me was not good. What he said, really was- what he said verbatim, quote unquote, is he said to me is 'why can't you guys be like everybody else?' And I looked at him and I said, Father, well, if it means getting drunk and rolling around on the floor in beer, I'm gonna pass because the big hit at that point in time was to (B-52's Rock Lobster?) And in that dance at some point in time you go down on the floor, and you flop around like a lobster. Well, there will be a layer of keg beer on the floor. And I'm looking at people, well, I'm not doing that, that's not, you know, that's just not going to happen. So there- there were aggressions in that way. And then some of them were just- were frankly, were people just flat out racist. Roots came out my freshman year and so we're in the door down in Fennell... when LeVar Burton, who was playing in Kunta Kinte gets his foot chopped off, so he will stop running. Some of my folk on floor thought that was amusing that he would get his foot chopped off. I didn't find it funny. And they didn't laugh anymore. I'll leave it at that. I didn't touch 'em, but I made it clear that you know, this is history being portrayed. It's television, but it's still history being portrayed and there's nothing funny about that. But you have a group of teenagers who should know better but don't know better.

**Nahyr Morales Lugo** 18:30

The next question is What did you wish you knew before you came to PC?

**Mal Davis** 18:45

Are you asking me what did I wish I knew about PC, in the area before I came because I'm not sure about the question.

**Nahyr Morales Lugo** 18:54

It could be also about like, how you wish you could have prepared better for the experiences that-

**Mal Davis** 19:02

I don't think there was- I don't think I told some of my guys we couldn't have prepared ourself for Providence. Academically, we were prepared. Socially, we were not prepared. Norfolk- I have to answer your question this way. So- so Norfolk back in those days was one of the two cities, if one does the research, Norfolk and Boston, were towns that were major cities in the US that were working hard to use bussing to achieve a racial balance. And so as I stated, my high school was pretty much perfectly split. And- but my classes were predominantly college prep and AP. And so when I've looked back over those classes, they were probably six or seven of us in there. But at night, I went back on my side of the tracks. At night at PC, I went to room 337 at Fennell and nobody else that looked like me lived on the floor. That's a culture shock, you can't get ready for. It's impactful. You know, it's impactful, go into class and not see anybody who looks like you, the majority of the community really doesn't get that, they didn't get it when I was in college. And they did not get it throughout my 39 year career in the Navy, because I rarely worked with anybody, anywhere, in the nation for the stuff that I did. I usually was the only one

who looked like me that was there. There is an impact to that. And it's not measurable, unless the script is flipped for you. And I've talked with my guys that that I graduated with, because I thought about it a lot, after we graduated. Like one guy was from New York, one was from New Haven, one was from Buffalo, one was from DC. So- and we're dawning on Providence and tie it back again into what I said, which doesn't even have a radio station. In my hometown, we had four radio stations that were- we had zero here. So you just- you- you, you're basically just dropped in sort of into this desert, that you're not ready for. You just, you know, you're just not ready for. You're at- and- and it has to be flipped on you to understand. People- people have said over the years, why does that make a difference? And I'm like, oh, it makes a difference, you need to be in that scenario in order to see it. You need to be in that scenario. And since you can't be in this scenario, you won't ever get it. I'm trying to help you get it but, you know, you're not gonna get sick, even if I take you to a place. That's not your everyday immersion. My everyday immersion is my everyday immersion, whether it was here at River Avenue, on Eaton Street, or 1 Cunningham Square, or whatever else we're calling it right now. I don't know, again, I'm not up on it right now. But just being funny, or it was at 1176 Howell Street, which is the naval laboratory. It, you know, it is there where I would see no one all day long. On my floor, when I came to that floor on June 1st, 1983. I was the first they had seen as an engineer. That, you know, that is, you know, that is something. It happened the same way out there for the first Asian engineers that we brought in. It is what it is, it is what it is. But many times it's poo-pooed over. And people don't want to acknowledge that there is something to that. That has nothing to do. And I feel the need to say- that has nothing to do with an individual relationship. But we're just talking about being dropped into a situation and I don't know that any of us could have been prepared for the impact of that because we just didn't know. You know, still a great school but we just, you know, we just didn't know. So.

**Nahyr Morales Lugo** 24:05

I think that was perfectly put for a lot of POC students.

**Mal Davis** 24:09

Ok, well that's good. Because it hasn't- because I do know it hasn't changed a lot. I live close enough that I come back. I don't interface as much as I used to because I want a younger generation closer to you all in age to use that interface. I mean all of this gray up. I'll come in support where I can but it needs to be a younger group. But I had a group in, they graduated. The last ones graduated in '08. And I remember sitting down with them, we used to have sessions called pizza and pop just for the guys because Doctor Wilesse Comissiong asked me if I could come back on to the campus because all they had were women in the Balfour Center. And I was like, sure Doc. And so we would- she would pay for the pizza and pop and we would just sit there and talk and I would listen to them. And I would, and I didn't say it to them. But behind my facade or the mask that I'm- I'm talking to them, I'm infuriated, because it's 2006 - 2008. And I'm hearing stories that are the same as '76 and '78. And that's unacceptable. That really is, you know, that really- that really is unacceptable. But- but my message to students all the time is, the administration really doesn't change it, you change it, one relationship at a time by actually getting to know each other, and not just to hear each other, but to actually listen to each other. Because my idea is this- if I listen to what you're saying, it means I'm going to try to understand. And if I understand, if I'm listening, and I understand, then I'm gonna try to change. But most people just hear you. And it's like, Yeah, I hear what

you're saying. And- and that- that really means you're dismissed, doesn't mean anything- it doesn't mean that I'm trying to take on- take on what it is.

**Nahyr Morales Lugo 26:18**

I agree. And you kind of touched on this, but if you want to elaborate. The next question is, what advice would you give current POC students, especially first generation students about navigating life at PC or college in general?

**Mal Davis 26:34**

Um, engage yourself into as many things as you can engage yourself with. And I'm gonna circle back into that, for example. When- When I was in Student Congress, there were a group of folk who said, You should run for president. And I'm like, ah, excuse me, I'm one of 40. That's not going to happen. I'm not going to have the pants beat off of me, because I stuck my neck out there. And I don't remember what it- because I met her. Finally, there was a student of color here in the 2000s, who was president of Student Congress. But- it's many risks I'm willing to take, I wasn't really willing to take that particular risk, because it just- the numbers just didn't add up for me and I'm a mathematician, I'm a number's guy. You know, the numbers don't add up. When I look back on it, though, I was popular enough that I would have been a lot closer. So take some risks. Make friends. engage yourself in what a small co-located campus like this has to offer. I didn't know that Providence was the right place for me until after. I wanted to go to UCal Berkeley and I had a scholarship. It's too long of a time to tell the story. But I'm my mother's youngest child and she said you're not going to California and if Mama said I'm not going to California, I'm not going to California. So all of the California schools were erased. We didn't have this term back then. And it's not an insult to- to PC. PC was my safe school and safe only in the fact that it was on this Coast. Because if you look at my list of schools, they were all west of the Mississippi. And they're really on the California coast. In nice areas that I saw were on TV. Pepperdine in Malibu and all of those places so, but I came to find out that this was a photo waited on cut. This was a place where I could make a difference. I think I did. I still think I do. So if you stay inside of your hole, if you remain like a turtle, and every time something good comes, you pull your legs and your- and your shell and- in college, for anybody, becomes a- not a good experience. Because this doesn't speak directly to it, but you just hit something up- drew something out of my head. I remember being- I'm gonna say this right, I remember being in the AMP, then the Providence Civic Center for graduation, and my roommate Kenny and I are in line, his last name begins with a B, mine is with a D. So we're standing up in line, we're in our cap and gown, we're in the line. Now, mind you, scenario. You also know you're in a sad place when, and I'll do this in the midst of the story, and then I'll tell you what it means. So Jerry, Rudy, Kenny, Nadene, Sarah, Claudia, Mal. That's the person of color graduating class of 1981. All my friends. Still in contact with them all today, that I can name them. But it was the times. No, it was it- you know, it was the times. But, so Kenny and I are standing near each other in line. And he was my roommate. Also in an apartment we had off campus. And a number of students, the majority said, what a waste of four years. And he and I looked at each other, said wait a minute if they're feeling that way, what the heck was it for us? This is what they thought. I don't think it was a four year waste. I think it was a place that, you know, and every place has warts. That allowed me to do some things and continues to allow me to do some things. And one of the things I won't allow with the administration when I have conversations with them, and I warn them don't ever talk to me about another school. Don't tell me about our sisters schools. I don't want to

hear about Georgetown, I don't want to hear about Villanova, Seton Hall, St. John's, I don't want to hear about BC. I don't wanna hear about any of the Catholic schools. The piece of paper I hold says Providence. They have their own issues. Let's work on our issues. But expand yourself allow- allow yourself to, you know, to take in because you are not a guppy in a big ocean as I would have been at Berkeley. You know, there's something beautiful about the school not wanting to be a university, and still wanting to have that college feel along with getting a superior education. So there are great benefits. We have warts, but there are also great benefits.

**Nahyr Morales Lugo 33:08**

And the last question is anything else you'd like to share? And that could be any experience that didn't fit into the questions or it can be about the project? Anything you want.

**Mal Davis 33:19**

Nah, I think I squeezed in what I wanted to squeeze in, I squeezed in what I wanted to squeeze in. The only thing I would say is that and it's not just a PC thing, it's a societal thing. We are but a microcosm of society. We hold these phrases such as a post-racial society, there's no such thing. People think I'm being defeatist when I say this, but I really say it from, not a Roman Catholic's perspective, but a small see Catholic, which means universal so. In the Universal Church itself, if the world at the Fall became cursed, everything changed. And this only works if- if one accepts scripture, if the world at the fall became cursed, and Jesus comes to make all things right, we can make things better. But we can't eradicate because he is the only one who has the ability to eradicate, and clean everything up. Because there's always going to be people. And we're in the midst of this, and I'm sure PC is in the same way that we have allowed the edges to define the narrative now, where the middle, the bill used to define the narrative, now, we have a hump on this side of the hump on this side, it's not only in Washington, or in every state house. It's probably on every college campus that- that the extremes defined instead of the largest segment of all, which should be defined in narrative. And we have to, people have to find their commonality, find their common ground and work towards that. And in that way, you know, the college talks about a beloved community. You only get the beloved community, if you do things to foster that. And in doing things to foster that, sometimes it becomes painful, it's uncomfortable, this is just not, you know, it's just, you know, and I knew that long before I got this grey hair I mean, I've known that since I came to this campus. It is not really about this campus, it was something that my, my father fostered within me. And that's why I go back to it's micro, not a macro thing, that it's one relationship at a time. I would close with saying this. She's unnamed, I have a good friend, classmate. And she chided herself for not being a better advocate when she was here at school, because she's now in her 60s, and she's expanded. She has- she's seen some things. And I told her I'm not going down that rabbit hole with you. We work together now. We were growing then, People do the same thing in your generation now too that- that you're starting to climb the ladder, the successes, the failures, don't be afraid to fail. You learn more from failure than you learn from success. Success doesn't really teach you anything. It's failures. And learning from those. If you fail and you don't learn anything from it than you did truly- you just wasted a whole bunch of time. But if you learn from that, or from the disappointment, or whatever the word is you want to use, you know, to describe it. I've tried to instill that in my own children. I'm like, look, don't be stupid. But don't be afraid to fail because you're gonna learn something out of it. And I've had plenty of successes

and I've had even more failures than I and it's not hyperbole, I learned from the failures. I learned from the failures, how to make lemonade out of lemons. Thanks.

**Nahyr Morales Lugo** 37:57

Thank you so much for everything.