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Interviews of the Margaret MacVicar Memorial AMITA Oral History Project

Khadijah Brown - Class of 1975

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DAVIS: First I'd like to ask you for a little background information, something about your family. Where you were born, and so on?

BROWN: I grew up in New Jersey and my mother and all of her family were teachers. So education was very important. My mother came from Virginia. All her brothers and sisters went to college and her father went to college so I'm a third-generation college graduate. It was very important right from the beginning to go to college.

DAVIS: What were your parents' occupations?

BROWN: My mother was a teacher and my father was a civil engineer. My mother is from Virginia, and my father is from Michigan.

DAVIS: What made you want to go to college? Were your childhood goals different from what you actually did?

BROWN: Well I was always interested in architecture. By the way, I'm a licensed architect. It's difficult to be a licensed architect. You have to go to school for six years and either get a five year Bachelor's or Master's degree and then you had to work for three years before you could take the licensing exam. So to be a licensed architect is a big deal. I always like buildings, and I always liked building things as a kid. I always liked to go over to a friend's house that had brothers, and I would always play with their brothers' blocks. Growing up I didn't have any brothers. I always wanted to go into architecture, but I didn't really know what it was. So I picked MIT because they had a good architecture program and the minute I went there I knew that was what I wanted to do. The field is not that exciting as I thought it would be. I'm doing a lot of more conservation and rehab work than I thought I would be doing. I thought I'd be doing more building.

DAVIS: When did you realize that you wanted to go to MIT? Who suggested it? Who were your high school mentors?

BROWN: When I was in high school I started looking at architecture schools and found MIT had a good architecture program. I visited a couple schools my junior and senior year of high school, and I had friends up in Boston. I was deciding between Georgia Tech and MIT, and I was deciding between Atlanta and Boston. Many people asked me why would you decide between Georgia Tech and MIT, and I thought Atlanta would be more fun, but I had more friends up in Boston.

However growing up in New Jersey I didn't know anything about MIT. I didn't really have a mentor in high school. I took a mechanical drafting class in high school. At that time in 1971 they didn't have any girls in the class, but I told them I wanted to take it so they let me in. I was the only girl in the class. When I asked them they said okay, but they said that I probably would not want to do it. They thought I would drop out, but I didn't.

DAVIS: Was it unusual for a person in your neighborhood to go to college that was not commuting distance?

BROWN: No, most of the people that I knew in high school were going to college, and they went away. Most black kids that I knew were going to the southern schools and historically black colleges. I was very involved with the black power movement in the early 1960s and early 1970s, so everyone was asking me why I wasn't going to a historically black college, but I wanted to go to MIT.

DAVIS: What type of high school did you go to?

BROWN: It was not a math and science school. It was a regular public school.

DAVIS: Was it mostly minorities or a mixture?

BROWN: It was mostly white. It was maybe 30% or 40% black.

DAVIS: When you were in elementary and middle school did you feel like you stood out from the other classmates?

BROWN: I went to a mostly black elementary school and a mostly white high school. I didn't feel like I stood out in the elementary school, but I felt like stood out in the high school. I was in the pre-calculus class that was mostly boys which was different. All the other classes were mixed, but the calculus and physics classes were mostly boys.

DAVIS: What year did you graduate from MIT? Where did you live on campus? Was there segregation by gender or race?

BROWN: I lived on the sixth floor of McCormick and at that time it was an all-black floor from about 1972 to 1976. I don't know how much longer after that. Interesting enough, we had a black guy who was a resident at McCormick. He lived in the top floor in the RA apartment. I think his name was Ahmed. It was very interesting that a guy was living there. He used to have ice cream parties and one time he had an apartment party.

- DAVIS: When you went to MIT did mostly all the female students live in McCormick?
- BROWN: Yes, but there were girls at Baker house and also at MacGregor. "Chocolate City" was over in East Campus in Senior House. Ibbey, my son who currently goes to MIT, said Chocolate City started in 1975, but they were there before 1975. I think they became official in 1975. I do not know what year Chocolate City moved to New House, but before '75 I remember Chocolate City was in Senior House on East Campus.
- DAVIS: Was Chocolate City located at Senior House the whole time you were there?
- BROWN: I think so, see what I did was, I graduated in 1975, and I was in Ohio for a year. Then I came back to MIT, but I lived off campus, so I wasn't involved in undergraduate stuff when I was in graduate school and I didn't really keep in touch with a bunch of people.
- DAVIS: So you did your undergrad and grad studies at MIT?
- BROWN: Yes, I actually went to the University of Cincinnati for a year because I had to do a five year Bachelor's or a Master's. I wanted to do a five year Bachelor's, but MIT didn't have one, so I went to the University of Cincinnati for a year. There I got the five year Bachelor's degree and then worked, but I didn't like the school, so in the meantime I applied to go back to MIT.
- DAVIS: Did you get the five year Bachelor's from University of Cincinnati?
- BROWN: No, I didn't get the five year bachelor's there. I got a four year BSAD from MIT, and I went to University of Cincinnati and took some classes. I didn't stay long enough to finish because they were going to make me do two years of classes. I figured that if I'm going to do two years of classes, why don't I just go back to MIT and do a Master's. So I went back and got my Master's degree and finished in '78.
- DAVIS: What were the percentages of women and black women at MIT when you went there?
- BROWN: I'm not sure about women, but all the black women I knew lived on the 6th floor of McCormick, so there must have been like 20 or 25 at the time.
- DAVIS: Was there a reason that all the black women chose to live on the 6th floor?

BROWN: Yes, it was the black floor, like the black women's "Chocolate City." It was the culture at the time. It was also a way for me to get a single because if I hadn't lived on the 6th floor of McCormick, they would have dumped me into the other tower of McCormick with triples, so I lucked out. I had a single my freshman year.

DAVIS: I heard Caucasians that did live on the 6th floor moved out.

BROWN: Yes, freshman year there were two that moved out. There wasn't any antagonism they just moved out.

DAVIS: Did you feel like your high school education prepared you for MIT? Were the faculty welcoming and did you encounter any prejudice based on gender or race?

BROWN: I think I experienced more prejudice based on gender than race. But, my high school really prepared me. I worked pretty hard in high school and worked really hard at MIT. I didn't ace out any classes like Ibby, my son did, but I was prepared for it. I wasn't failing any classes. All my classes were Pass/Fail as a freshman so that was nice. The faculty were welcoming and everything. They tried very hard to find me a black female advisor, but she was a librarian at the time.

DAVIS: Did you ask for a black female advisor?

BROWN: I might have said preferences, but that was the only person they could find. She was not that helpful at all in trying to plan my classes. We kind of just would sit and talk and she would say, "Well just do what you want to do." (Laughs) I don't know what everyone else did.

DAVIS: Did you feel supported by the faculty?

BROWN: No (laughs) but right away I started taking classes in the architecture department and there were a couple of people in the architecture department that were supportive. The assistant department head would help me with questions and stuff.

DAVIS: What was your social life like at MIT?

BROWN: I was in the Black Student's Union (BSU). We would do tutoring and events at the BSU. When I was a senior I would tutor freshman, but I had a lot of friends from New Jersey that went to school in Boston. I had a friend at Tufts, a friend at Dartmouth and a friend at Boston University, so I would go visit them a lot instead of partying on campus.

DAVIS: Can you give me an example of your typical weekend at MIT?

BROWN: Well, I didn't do sports. I had friends that did sports. So I would either take the bus to go see friends or I was on campus doing work and studying.

DAVIS: What challenges did you face at MIT?

BROWN: When I went to school I wanted to do a third year abroad and at the time there wasn't a real program set up for it. I wanted to study housing in Nigeria. I eventually did do that in graduate school. We got a grant and stayed in Nigeria for six weeks. I graduated in three years and how I did that was I took some summer classes and overloaded my freshman year, more classes than are allowed now. I did that with the view to do my junior year abroad, but MIT didn't have a program for that. Everyone would tell me to write my own program, and I would be like, "How do I do that?" (Laughs) So I would write schools, and they wouldn't write me back. So that was a challenge, and I didn't know who to go to. I never went and all of a sudden at the end of my sophomore year, looking at my classes I said, "Oh, I have enough to graduate next year." So I did. I finished in three years. That was fun (laughs), and I wasn't sure I was really going to do it until the middle of my last year. I wasn't sure if they would accept all the credits and everything. My biggest challenge was finding an advisor to help me do that.

DAVIS: What skills did you acquire through your MIT years?

BROWN: I was very political in high school, and then when I went to MIT I was so busy with work I was not that politically involved. I was involved with the BSU and everything, but that's about it. I didn't get involved in any outside democratic, statewide or presidential campaigns.

DAVIS: Would you make the same choice of the university if you were doing it today?

BROWN: Yes, I would pick MIT again. The thing that I didn't take advantage of was combining different majors.

DAVIS: What did you do after college?

BROWN: I got married after graduate school and then we went overseas for about two years. That was the start of the building boom in Saudi Arabia. So we were in Saudi Arabia for about two years and worked. We were there for religious reasons also. There was a big building boom and there was a lot of money to be made. We earned a lot of money and spent a lot of money (laughs) and didn't bring anything

back. After I was in school for so many years, the first two or three months out of graduate school I think I read everyday for fun. I read the Lord of the Rings Trilogy, all three books just one after another. After that we came back, we lived in Washington DC for about seven years, and I worked in a couple architecture firms. Then we moved to Boston. I started working for the city. I was working for the city of Boston in their Public Facilities Department doing construction management. Then I came to the school department doing design and development. Later, I was assistant director, and now I'm director of facilities.

DAVIS: Was your husband an architect as well?

BROWN: Yes, Muhammad was. When we moved to Boston he worked at the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) and a couple different places. Also he was a teacher at Wentworth University in architecture. We are divorced now though.

DAVIS: How exactly was Saudi Arabia?

BROWN: Muhammad was teaching in an architecture school and doing consulting on the side and I was in between not doing anything (laughs) and doing consulting and architecture. So we were doing preliminary drawings and construction drawings for different firms and different people.

DAVIS: What is your religion?

BROWN: I am Muslim.

DAVIS: So did you go to Saudi Arabia for religious reasons?

BROWN: Yes, mostly. Also at the time there were not a lot of jobs. In the engineering field there is a need for people, but in architecture they don't recruit as much. So I had a lot of friends that got flown around different places by companies to work for them, but architecture is different, you sort of have to pursue different companies for jobs, kind of like art. We had a hard time finding a job, but we got recruited by the Faisal University in Saudi Arabia. So we worked for the university and we worked for an architecture firm.

DAVIS: With the coursework at MIT, did it affect your religious obligations?

BROWN: No, for some people if you're in college it is much more partying and socially oriented. If you want to set aside time for partying and religion, it is up to you. I didn't party much during my undergrad time, but in

grad school I attended more religious events. I knew some people, Sam Nixon—he's a preacher now—he used to go church all day Sunday. And I was like, "How do you spend all Sunday in church?" But he did his course work.

DAVIS: What do you see as your next step in your career?

BROWN: I don't know. I was recruited by the ATL public schools and they wanted me to come down and interview, but I have a sixteen year old that is a junior in high school, and I am not moving until he graduates. If a position comes up, I would probably take another position in another school because I like doing schools. But I don't know, I might retire here.

DAVIS: Do you think the work place has changed to accommodate woman?

BROWN: Yes, my first summer job my dad got me I was testing the density in abutments to bridges and the compaction factor, and we would do moisture density tests. I had this density detector that used uranium. You had to wear a special badge and you would put a probe down and the machine would measure how much you had compacted the soil for the approach to the bridge. I was the first woman that they ever had, and it was a field job. So we would go to different bridges and we would work out of a trailer. The trailer had playboy pin-ups all over the place. They were all white guys there, and they never took them down. I work at a lot of construction projects now and no one dares to do that because now there are a lot of women architects.

DAVIS: Have you had conflicts between career and life choices?

BROWN: Yes, it is very difficult for a woman to have a job and be expected to work the long hours that everyone else works and then be expected to have kids. When I had to pick my kids up at daycare, drop them off every day, and figure out where they wanted to go to camp, that was difficult.

DAVIS: Did you have to sacrifice some things with work or family?

BROWN: You can't tell to your daycare person, "Oh I won't be home until 8pm." Even if you have someone come to your house, which at some point I did decide to have someone come to my house, they have a life too. So unless you have live-in help or a husband to do the pick up and drop off, you are out of luck. In one sense, I have stayed with government because government has allowed me the flexibility. Most people don't expect you to work 80 hours. I do work a lot of hours now, but with the hours I work now I could not have a child that was in daycare. But

before when I was more of a junior, I was expected to work more hours. I think you make choices for your advancement in your career based on family life. In retrospect, it was a pain in the neck.

DAVIS: Any advice you want to give to young women grads?

BROWN: You know at some point you have to make a value judgment: what's more important to you, your career or your family? I think the older I get the more I realize you make different choices at different points in your life.