

Interviews of the Margaret MacVicar Memorial AMITA Oral History Project, MC 356
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Tammy Stevens – class of 1996

Interviewed by Shawna Davis, class of 2012

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Margaret MacVicar/AMITA Oral History Project Interview

Tammy Stevens (S.B. 1996, Materials Science and Engineering; S.B. 1997, Management) was interviewed by Shawna Davis (SB 2012, Materials Science and Engineering) at MIT on December 16, 2010. At the time of the interview, Stevens was Associate Dean of the Institute's Office of Minority Education.

DAVIS: I'd like to know about some of your background. Where were you born? Are there any specific circumstances that influenced your attitude toward education?

STEVENS: [LAUGHS] Right off the bat!

I was born in Syracuse, New York. My family has always been supportive of my going on and doing extra studies. I have two uncles who are very close in age to me. I guess that kind of changes the dynamics a little. My grandmother is extremely young. She got married at 16 or 17. My mother is her oldest child, so not very far in age difference, but I have two uncles who are very close to me in age. I kind of grew up with them, in some sense.

I was always the one who was into the books. They were always into playing around, and playing basketball or football. It was very interesting to see family dynamics. "Oh, Tammy's the smart one!" my family would say. I don't buy into that. I think we all have different gifts and talents; we just have to figure out what those are and go after those. Because when you start trying to do things that are not a natural fit, it just makes you not like it. I think that was probably what they found. They didn't like certain subjects in school, so they said, "Whatever," whereas I enjoyed reading. I liked math. I think I just enjoyed learning.

Also, I was an only child, so I spent a lot of time by myself. My father died when I was really young, so it was just my mom and I. Then she was off working, so I really spent a lot of time by myself. For me books became an escape, and so it was, "Let me just learn!"

I would say that my friends influenced me. My grandmother strongly believed you should only have a small circle of friends that you keep close. Everybody else, that's nice, they can call themselves friends if they want to-- I really took that heart. I grew up with some people who I'm still friends with to this day, that I consider to be more like sisters. We influenced each other, so we've all gone off to college. We've all gone off to graduate school. It just was what we expected of each other. I think that kind of was it.

Let's see, I was involved in a lot of programs in Syracuse [New York] that were geared toward science and engineering. I spent a lot of time at Syracuse University. Since the seventh grade, I think I spent every Saturday up there. So I had a lot of sacrifice and lots of [LAUGHS] wonderful Saturdays where you would wake up and you would think, "Oh gosh – I have to be up at the university by 8:30 a.m.!" Then we didn't finish by four o'clock in the afternoon. It was a big time commitment, but at the time I didn't really think much about it. It was really every Saturday since seventh grade. Many of my summers, entire summers, were spent on Syracuse University's campus.

DAVIS: What were you doing there?

STEVENS: They had a program called, "Science Technology Inter-Program." We would go, and they would expose us to different things in science and different things in engineering, why we needed to be scientists and engineers, especially as people of color. We had an obligation.

We also did a lot of stuff on racial identity, which I think was very helpful. I got to learn some history that's kind of interesting and gave me definitely more perspective on things. Probably very different than how my family saw things at times, but I'm okay with being the odd person out at times. That's a lot of it. Just being in that environment all the time around people who were in school at the university kind of was like, "Oh I love this! This is where I need to be."

DAVIS: What were your parents' occupations?

STEVENS: Let's see. Oh gosh, if I can remember what my father did-- I think he did something technical. I don't really know, because he died when I was really young. My mom was a cafeteria worker at a hospital. Neither of my parents went on to college. Actually, my father never even made it to high school. I was the first generation college graduate, even among extended family, in some sense.

DAVIS: What made you want to go to college?

STEVENS: I didn't want to be like the people I grew up with [LAUGHS]. I don't mean to sound like that, but I saw the lifestyle-- I grew up in a very low-income neighborhood, and I just knew, "Oh, this is not for me!" That was my attitude the whole time. You can all call me the names you want to call me, but I'm not going to be a part of this situation. I need to be out of it.

Also, I had teachers from very young, starting in elementary school, who said, "Well, why not go to college?" It just expands your knowledge and all of your opportunities. I wholly bought into it.

DAVIS: Were your childhood goals different from what you actually did?

STEVENS: Not very different; I mean I always knew. I didn't know exactly what I would do with science, but I knew I would always do something with science and math.

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

STEVENS: I picked MIT just because I did the research, and I think I was a very little bit egotistical or something. I thought, "I'm applying to every school, and every school I apply to is going to accept me." That was my goal going into high school originally, that wherever I apply to college I'm going to get accepted hands down. That was the goal, and I was.

I wanted to do science, but I also knew I had an interest in business. So I kind of thought, "Okay, who has strong science and engineering programs as well as strong business programs?" That narrowed it down quite a bit. That left MIT, Stanford, Georgia Tech, in some sense, and Cornell, just because of the proximity to Syracuse. So for me, that was kind of it.

Ultimately, I had a conversation with some people who were current students at the Institute. They made the decision for MIT, and also the financial package overall was the best. Since my family didn't have any money to pay for school, that was part of the decision, for sure.

DAVIS: Did you have any high school mentors?

STEVENS: I did. My high school chemistry professor. She was a black woman with a Ph.D. in chemistry. She became my mentor. We talked a lot. She had a daughter who graduated two years ahead of me from high school. Her daughter was at Harvard. We talked about MIT versus Harvard. She found Harvard people to be very bougie, which she didn't like herself, but that's where her daughter went. That probably was a good fit for her daughter. I didn't think that was really the type of people I wanted to be around. I had enough worries that I didn't want to be worried about classicism at the same time. She really helped me make my decision to come to MIT.

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

STEVENS: Yes. In my community, just the people I lived nearby, yes, but not for my high school. Most of the people-- My high school was ethnically very mixed. We were a city school, but two blocks away was the suburbs, so we had a lot. It was kind of like more of a suburban high school in the city. Ninety-something percent of our students went off to college. They usually went away. Some, of course, went to Syracuse, because Syracuse University was actually pretty good. All my friends left. It was one of those things, "We're leaving!" There was no doubt. But I would say locally, where I lived, I was definitely unique.

DAVIS: Moving on to questions about college, where did you live on campus? Was there segregation by gender or by race?

STEVENS: I lived in New House 2. I would definitely say we were segregated by race. We self-selected to live in New House 2. Housing was a process that was done very different than it is now. But yes, I wouldn't say by gender.

DAVIS: Do you know, if you had to guess, how many black women were in your class and what was the percentage of women at MIT when you were there?

STEVENS: I can tell you the percentage of women across all ethnic groups was 30%. I knew that because we were the highest percentage they had had at that time ever for women [LAUGHS]! Black women in my class? Let me see, how many were there? I can probably name them all. I think there were about 10 of us. Ten, maybe 12 on the high end. We were a very small black class, actually. We were kind of an anomaly. We were the smallest class in that time in that group, in terms of number of black students. We were under 5% [LAUGHS].

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

STEVENS: Yes, my high school did prepare me well to come here. Yes, there were definitely some racial things with faculty. I mean, a friend and I were in a class together, and we were the only people of color. I mean that across every color group you can name. The class was white, and we were the two spots in the class. The guy used the word, that is the correct word, but he didn't have to use the word. He was using "niggardly." It was kind of like, "Really? Do you really have to use that word?" We both knew what it meant, but it sent up a guard of, "Whoa, wow."

And we had other racial things that actually happened on campus to our classmates, walking on West Campus, walking past the fraternity houses that were over there to New House, people were yelling the "N" word out the window. So then we had big community discussions about that. We had to call a town hall meeting to discuss what was going on and to investigate this fraternity. It kind of definitely raised some racial tensions. It definitely, I think, changed my perspective on that particular fraternity, and to this day I kind of have to watch my bias when people say they're a member of that particular fraternity.

DAVIS: Did it ever get solved?

STEVENS: There were some discussions, and they said they didn't actually say it, that these people misheard, but when you have a group of people who heard the same thing, it's just hard to believe that all of them heard wrong.

There were meetings with this fraternity – along with people from the black community – to discuss how we were going to move forward with this, because there were no formal sanctions taken against the fraternity. We made the headline of *The Tech* for a while. It definitely didn't-- I don't think it got resolved for any of the black students' satisfaction. It was kind of like, "Well, we got you all together to talk about it, and that's good enough." It was like, "No, it's not really resolved, because something happened, and no real actions were taken."

DAVIS: What was your social life like?

STEVENS: I have had a great time here! I look back, and I think about it like, it was fine. I think there was this elitist attitude [LAUGHS] back then that I think was more prevalent back then than it is among current students. The whole term of 'crossing the river' was the big thing. We only hung out with mainly people from Harvard and Tufts. So we never really went to parties or socialized with people from Northeastern, BU and BC, because that was, in some sense, beneath us. I mean, I never really took it that far, because I had a really good friend who played basketball at Boston College from Syracuse. So for me, it was kind of like, "Wow, I'm facing these dynamics of do I continue to stay here?" So for me it was one of those things of, "If this person is a friend of mine, I'm going to watch them play basketball sometimes." But the audacity was, you can't interact with them [LAUGHS]!

DAVIS: Did you face any challenges at MIT?

STEVENS: I think so. I had no real idea-- My ultimate goal growing up was to get to college. I never thought about what I would totally want to do out of

college. I don't think we had any time at MIT to really think about, "What do I want to do with my career? What do I really want my life to be like after I graduate?" because you come in first year, and by the end of that year you have to declare a major. If you pick the wrong thing you could be here longer than you expected.

I was like, "I'm not staying here any longer than I need to be here!" That for me was a struggle. I know I like math and science but it turns out I don't like engineering. I didn't realize that until I got into class. I was like, "This stuff sucks!" It's not a natural talent for me, and I just don't like it!
[LAUGHS]

DAVIS: That's me!

STEVENS: Back then, there was a lot more pressure to do science and engineering and, more specifically, to do engineering. So if you were thinking of doing pure science, it was kind of looked down upon. I actually had to have a big debate with myself.

I think I would have made different decisions now. I really should have just gone and enjoyed Sloan. I loved finance. Finance and Econ I absolutely loved. They came naturally, and I've always loved the study of the stock market. But because of the peer pressure, I stuck with science and engineering. I was like, "Okay. Well, alright. It's MIT."

DAVIS: What was your major?

STEVENS: I ended up double majoring because I really just knew I hated engineering and just could not see my life as an engineer (LAUGHS). I thought, "I'm going to be miserable for the rest of my life!" So I ended up double majoring in [courses] 3 and 15. I was really happy. I made sure I got all my 3 classes out of the way so my very last three semesters here were all over at Sloan. It was a whole different experience. I had two completely different experiences: one I hated and one I loved.

DAVIS: What skills did you acquire through MIT education? Problem solving, socio-political--

STEVENS: I would definitely say the big thing I learned is that problem solving is definitely something I had never thought I was really skilled at, but I've learned it is a skill. I think MIT is probably really tops at it. I probably solved problems even in disciplines I don't know anything about just from the tools I gained here. I never would have thought about that.

Politically, MIT taught me how to tolerate a lot. I think our MIT students, culture-wise, are very conservative, and I love politics, so for me it was like, "Are you kidding?"

My roommate and I, it was the first time we could vote, and it happened to be a presidential election year. We said, "Yes! We're going to go and vote and join the campaign." We had posters up of [Bill] Clinton and everything! "Really? You have posters up?" And we were, like, "Yes, it's a presidential election!"

I think people tend to be very politically apathetic overall as a culture, whereas that wasn't me. I didn't really care. I was just happy to be able to vote. To me, that's a big civic responsibility. From history, our people were not always allowed to vote. There's still people in the world who can't vote, so to have that as something given to us that we have, our people had to die for and fight for, we have a responsibility to use it. I think that's lost here. Sometimes people are saying, "I'm not going to vote." Are you serious? Do you understand what you're saying by not voting?

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

STEVENS: I would still come to MIT. But I would definitely do a different academic path than I actually chose. I'm pretty sure I would have just done straight 15. Possibly Urban Studies. I just think there are bigger societal issues that I would have tried to tackle, versus just worrying about science and engineering. That's probably for somebody else who really loves that stuff [LAUGHS].

DAVIS: What activities were you involved with?

STEVENS: Oh, gosh. Let's see. There were lots of them! I was Social Chair in New House 2, and at some point Treasurer in New House 2, president of New House 2. I was on the New House judicial committee. I was part of Rush Chair for New House. I was vice president of NSBE [National Society of Black Engineers]. I was part of OME [Office of Minority Education]. I was on the Committee for Academic Performance. I was on a presidential committee for engineering in the undergraduate experience. I was involved in a lot of things while I was here. I just believed that I had no right to complain about MIT's situation if I wasn't being actively involved in trying to fix the things that were broken, in my opinion. I was very involved.

DAVIS: What did you do after college? Can I have a brief timeline of what you did?

STEVENS: Sure! Directly after I graduated in 1997 – because I stayed an extra year to finish the course 15 degree – I went into litigation consulting. Consulting was just hot back then, and I had no idea what litigation consulting was. All I knew was that I was going to be consulting. So I did that from 1997 until 2003. I worked at two different companies at the time. Originally, I started out at Coopers & Lybrand, which then became merged with PricewaterhouseCoopers, which it is still today. That was a fantastic experience, because I went to MIT and I got put on projects that other people with more experience got put on. I got to go live in Europe for about a year because I came from MIT.

I left PWC in about 2000. So around 2000, I joined a small boutique consulting firm, FTI [FTI Consulting]. I did that until about 2003, and in the meantime I was also working on my MBA, because I always knew I wanted an MBA. So I had to make a decision at some point whether I wanted to go do the typical MIT thing and go to Harvard Business School or do something else. I decided that I loved the D.C. area, so I decided to just do my MBA in the D.C. area. I went to the University of Maryland at College Park. I made sure I checked the rankings because it was partially important, but it's not ultimately important.

I had a great time. I didn't have to work hard; it was good [LAUGHS]. I was working full-time and doing my MBA full-time, which I would never suggest to anybody! I decided I didn't want to do litigation consulting anymore, just because I was traveling almost 90% of the time, and that just was not a good lifestyle for me anymore. So I went to work for Microsoft in 2003, in their finance group right in Washington, D.C. I stayed there until late 2006.

I decided I wanted to go try other stuff in finance, so I went to work for Capital One in their credit card division, in their strategy group for credit cards. I stayed there for a little while. Then I had this thought: "If I want to go into academics, now is the time. Just because I'm making a lot of money, and I'm not going to give up all this money!" Even though I didn't. In January 2008, I came to work for MIT [as Associate Dean of the Office of Minority Education].

DAVIS: What do you see as your next step?

STEVENS: I think I have become this very almost, I would say, socialist-- I'm a big advocate for seeing the education system change. I think working in college, especially here in a university like MIT, I think the students here will be fine. But how do we get more students to MIT, or even to think about college? For me, I need to touch students before college. So,

elementary school, middle school, before they make that choice of, "I'm not going to college, I'm going to go down this path." They need to understand. I think I feel like our education system is broken.

I came, like I said, from a very poor family, but I think I got a great education, and I don't think that's happening anymore for people who grow up in the same neighborhood I grew up in. I see their educational experience, and I think, "What in the world? What's going on with our school systems?" My high school now has a metal detector. What? We were too bougie for metal detectors. I grew up poor, but we were too bougie for metal detectors [LAUGHS]! That's going to mess up our fashion sense! We would have to take stuff off to walk through these things?

For me it's important to give back. In some sense, it's back to the whole history thing. Some people died to pave the way for me to hold to at least try to fix it. I think it's at the point if I don't know if it can get fixed. But I believe we need a revolution to change it [LAUGHS]!

DAVIS: Do you feel the workforce has changed to accommodate women?

STEVENS: Yes and no. I think people are more accepting of women in non-traditional roles such as science and engineering, anything in the medical field. So it's more accepted, but there are still unwritten rules and policies that exist for women.

I had a friend who had a baby out of wedlock. People are still in this traditional mindset of, "You need to be married, and then you can have kids." But even if you have kids as a married woman, we can't depend on you as much because now you have this child. So you won't get put on these big projects, where you're sitting there like, "I'm more qualified and have proven myself more than this person, but because I'm a woman with a child I'm not going to be put on that project."

Definitely-- I've faced other sexism. Like I said, I came out of finance and consulting, which are very male-heavy. They're sitting there and talking about going to strip clubs, and that's how they were socializing. Personally, I started with a male peer, and he goes with them to the strip club. Who gets promoted? He does, even though my work quality is better.

It's the little stuff like that that still definitely exists. Women tend to get paid less, and that's still very much a reality. You have to be assertive still, but that's a double-edged sword for a woman, because if you're overly assertive you're now aggressive, and that's seen as the one that's trying to

be a man! I watched that especially as I've worked pretty much after finance and consulting, and I've worked only for technology in some sense.

In technology companies it's still very real. I would hear guys say, "If she wants to act like a man, we're going to treat her like a man." Well, what is she doing that is acting like a man? She's standing up for herself! Now isn't that what all humans should do if you're feeling taken advantage of? I don't know if MIT does a good job preparing the women for what they're really going to face when they graduate from here.

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

STEVENS: No, not really. I mean I have friends who have, but no [LAUGHS].

DAVIS: If you were giving advice to young women graduating today, what would you say?

STEVENS: I would say that I grew up in the time when they were telling women you can have it all. I don't believe that. I don't believe you can be a good wife, mother and have a great career all at the same time. I think you can do all three things and be great, but just not at the same time. At some point, you will have to make decisions like, "Alright, I'm going to have a great career now. Now I'm going to be a great wife and a great mom." At some point you might decide, "Alright, I'm going back to having a great career." I just don't think this whole superwoman exists. And it shouldn't exist, because it doesn't exist for men.

I think as women we put too much pressure on ourselves. Society puts a lot of pressure-- Like, if you want to work, you have to still figure out how to be a great mom and wife, too. You know what? No! That's too much multi-tasking. You can't be great at everything at the same time. That would be my advice. Don't worry about it. Be great at whatever you decide to do with your life at that time. Then, in the next phase, be great at that, too. Don't worry about being great at everything all the time.

DAVIS: Thank you so much!