

DELTA XI AKA ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Interviewer: Briana M. Davis
Interviewee: Pamiel Gaskin
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TRANSCRIPT BEGIN

Briana M. Davis: We can get started with the first question. Please tell us your name and your role in the Delta Xi Chapter.

Pamiel Gaskin: My name is Pamiel, P-A-M-I-E-L. Johnson Gaskin, maiden name was Johnson when I was in the Delta Xi Chapter. I was initiated on May 20th, just a few days from now, 1966. There were 12 of us on my line. I held a couple of roles in the chapter. I was recording secretary for a year and I was the dean of pledges in 1967.

Davis: Wonderful. That is such a rich experience already, I'm sure. Getting into the next question. What high school did you attend and how did you come to be an AKA?

Gaskin: Okay, that's a good question. I attended Lincoln High School in Lamarck, Texas, that's in Galveston County. There were several people who were at Lincoln before me who met Judy Wilson, who was also a member of Delta Xi chapter. She was a couple of years ahead of me. However, how I came to go to the University of Texas, that was not my choice, UT was not my choice. I wanted to go to Spelman in Atlanta. However, my parents were activists and they were at a meeting, a NAACP meeting in Austin in 1946 and my mom was pregnant with me. Then they had finished their meetings and they decided they needed to, she walked every day. They started walking in. They walked up on the campus of the University of Texas and they were up on the mall in front of the tower and out of nowhere according to my parents came a police officer with a gun and told them they had, niggers were not allowed on the campus. Pointed the gun at my mom's belly and kept it pointed on them until they walked off the campus. My dad said he put his hand on her belly and he said this baby's born into this school. Not my choice, but that's how I ended up at UT.

Davis: What a remarkable story. First of all, we need to find this guy. We need to find the—he's probably long gone. Gosh, trauma and you didn't even come out of the stomach yet.

Gaskin: But I was a little activist. I guess they imparted some activism in me.

Davis: Forget.

Gaskin: Michael did come to the University of Texas though. I will get to that later.

Davis: How interesting. Well, that concludes Section 2. What can you tell us about the activities and service projects you've participated in and how did those impact you personally?

Gaskin: Of course, the history of Alpha Kappa Alpha is a history our motto is service to all mankind. I grew up in a household where it was expected that you would do some community service. That was one of the motivating factors of joining Alpha Kappa Alpha because they did have a focus on service. We

did quite a few things in Austin as limited as we were in the '60s being young Black women. You remember when I started in 1965, Black people didn't even have the right to vote. The voting rights kept me really sad. Now where people do voter registration and all that stuff we didn't do, that thing. But we did do projects in the East Austin community with the chapter that was at least until it's in the Alpha Kappa Alpha chapter, they have Beta Kappa chapter. We would combine, we did Christmas programs for kids, we raised money to get Christmas gifts for children whose parents may have been incarcerated or unable to provide things for them. Let's say a lot of the activities though that we did were social justice-type activities. We did a whole lot of marching. Our social activities were with a purpose. Now you have a party with a purpose? We had projects with a purpose.

Our graduate advisor was Willie Adeleco, and she's a legend in Texas. She ran for the school board in Austin and we helped in her campaign. She taught us how to block walls, how to knock on doors, how to give a 30-second speech, or why folks should come out and vote for her. It was a great training ground in the sorority. But also one of the other things that we did, we participated in the last two because at that time, we could not rent apartments on the UT side of I-35. Since back then, everybody has a car now. We have cars. Our parents did well to send us to school. We didn't have wheels. If you don't have wheels, how are you going to get back and forth from East Austin to the campus? You won't. We were all very thin and we all had real pretty legs because those muscles were small. But we agitated a lot for better housing. My first year there, the dorms were semi-decelerated because they had just desegregated the year before but most of us still lived in the Whitis and Almetris Co-ops right there on Whitis Avenue. I think the communication school is still there now. Right across the street, we were across the street from Kinsolving dormitory. Those are the things we participated in. We met with Darrell Royal and asked why there weren't any African-American football players. He told us he won't have any negros so we said, "Okay," we went to the next football game, marched around like Hebrew children marching around the walls of Jericho.

Davis: Super cool. It's very interesting learning where Black women were allowed to live and how they've migrated into different areas around campus so you stayed, is it near Kinsolving cafe?

Gaskin: Avenue. It was Kinsolving dormitory. I don't know if it's still there but it was Andrew's home Kinsolving and then you go further down at the end of why this was Grace hall. There was a private dorm, in a way that's passed where the dura and dorm is now. We were on that same street. Let's see, there's something just went through my mind, and I should've written it down but I did want to share it with you. We had a lot of fun. We were limited in where we could live, but we enjoyed each other and we were support for each other. In Almetris was where everybody gathered, graduate students, undergraduate students, the whole bit. Because we really could not participate in a lot of campus things. I remember we had a lot of people who were first this, first that. Orange jackets. There used to be an organization called Spooks, which was a service organization. I remember several of the AKAs were in Spooks, several were in Orange Jackets. I was in the ROTC Auxiliary called Cordettes. I was the first African-American in that. I got nominated for Bluebonnet Belle. Can you believe that? One of my girls from home Vialantha Ricks, who is deceased now. But she was one of the first African-American to be named one of the 10 most beautiful, and significant in that was that Farrah Fawcett was also one of the ten most beautiful that year. If you go to that yearbook, I think it's 65 or 66. I'm not sure which I think 65 because Vi and I were classmates in high school. There's this picture of all the 10 most beautiful on this stairway and she's there and there is Farrah Fawcett. So kind of cool.

Davis: I'm a big fan of Farrah Fawcett's blow out, I replicate it. Just this year the number Black students on campus is so much more now.

Gaskin: I was in English major, so this is going to sound very Englishy. Choose your prepositions wisely. We were at the university, we were not really in the university or of the university, we were just at the university.

Davis: It felt like having that imposter syndrome throughout your experience is something that you might have dealt with?

Gaskin: We were there. I'll never forget there used to be a Dean of the Panhellenic. She was over the Panhellenic. She had to check off certain things she had to do every year to meet her goals. One of them was to meet with the various sororities and she would never call us a sorority. She called us a group. Your group, your group this, your group that. One year she's meeting with us and she's asking us, "Well, what are you majoring in? What do you want to do?" Somebody was pre-med, somebody was business, and somebody was this. She says, "well, what are you girls planning on doing with these degrees? Because you're going to be teachers." It's like she had us in a little box. Her last name was Dean. I said, "Dean Dean you can leave now. We don't need to hear this from you. Bye Felicia." That phrase wasn't there then, "Bye Felicia!"

Davis: Bye Felicia indeed. We are getting into some other topics that I do want to cover. If we just come back around to it, feel free to reiterate or capitalize on certain things. Was there anything else that you wanted to tell us about the service projects that you participate in?

Gaskin: We did community type activities we just volunteered mostly with children's programs and that sort of thing.

Davis: I'm just going to be writing some notes as you talk there so if I'm looking down, I promise I'm here.

Pamiel Gaskin: No. I understand.

Davis: Okay. Moving onto to 2B, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority is the first Black organization at UT that was established by and for women. What are some firsts you've experienced or contributed to the organization? Now, examples of this can be initiatives founded by your chapter or social experiences that you've had for the first time that that really stood out. Just whatever.

Gaskin: One of the nice things that the chapter did, one of them, and I think they still do it. It's a tradition. We had tea for the graduating seniors. It was a formal tea with you know, the little sandwiches and the white tablecloths and the whole bit. Back then, of course, we couldn't go to a restaurant or anything so we would set up in the Student Union. We had flowers and it was just a very elegant affair. Some of the women from Austin who were members of our sponsoring chapter, Beta Xi Omega, they would come. That was one of our traditions that I hope it's still continuing because it was just a beautiful thing where we pay tribute to women who had survived the 40 acres and gotten a degree. That was one of the things. I have a picture somewhere of us doing a project with some kids. But we did a lot of work in the East Austin community. Understand that back then there was not the abject poverty that exists today. Schools may have been separate but unequal, but the community was involved. When you get into things like gentrification, they're moving out the core of the community, the churches there were the center and the hub. We all went to church, I went to the St. James church over in East Austin, and we did a lot of our activities through the churches. If the church was having Women's Day or something

like that, we'd go. Then maybe one of the women from Beta Xi Omega was going to be the speaker, we go to support that.

Let me just be honest. We were not loved and appreciated on campus. We all knew why we were there. We were to get a degree and to keep it moving. It amazes me today that so many students take so long to finish school. When we got there, it was like, "When am I going to graduate?" Most of us graduated in three or four years. We didn't mess around. Most of us when we graduated said we'll never come back. I'm not rich in a lot of things that we did. The Texas Relays were always in April. That was a lot of fun. That was party, party, party. That was the one time that we did party. I can remember my sister who was younger than I would come and spend the weekend and I would have to make sure that some of these guys that I knew weren't trying to hit on her. But we loved to go to the Texas Relays because they were parties. The Alpha Phi Alpha had a house. We had a lot of parties at the Alpha house, every weekend pretty much. The Texas Relays was always a high point. Then on the weekends we just got together and we would go to the Student Union. While at the end of when I was there in 67, 68, we started soul night at the Student Union and it was on Friday nights. Let me tell you, people would come. Black students would come from Dallas and from Houston. They would come from Prairie View, Texas Southern. They would come to soul night on Friday night at the Texas Student Union. We would play the all the latest hits. The Temptations, the Supremes, the Four Tops. We danced and just had a good time, sweat our hair out.

Davis: Wow. It's so crazy that people came from all over, what building did you say that was?

Gaskin: In the student union. I don't know what it's called now, but it was student union building.

Davis: I do believe it still is.

Gaskin: It's an old building, beautiful old building. Yeah.

Davis: Very nice.

Gaskin: Our chapter was chartered in that building, in the Queen Ann Room.

Davis: In the Queen Ann Room? I hear about the Queen Ann Room a lot and I didn't know where it was. Now I do, so I'm going to write that.

Gaskin: That's in the student union and we were chartered at high noon in the Queen Ann Room on May 16.

Davis: 16th, was it 1959?

Gaskin: 1959.

Davis: Wow super cool. Well, I wonder if I can still visit that room. Do you know if it's open to the public?

Gaskin: Well, it's a student union so it should be open. It should be open to anybody on campus. I don't remember what floors they were in, but I'm sure you can ask. Someone there probably has the history of that building.

Davis: I could always ask the people at the front desk too just to see, because I do want to do some snooping and I would love to visit. I've been to the union underground, do you know if that part was still there at the time like the bowling alley with pool tables. No?

Gaskin: I don't remember, it might not have been there. Let me tell you when I graduated, they were digging the hole for Jester Dormitory.

Davis: A lot of the AKAs that I talked to actually stayed in Jester and they got to know Mama Duren during their stay. Were you familiar with Mama Duren?

Gaskin: Oh Lord, yes. She was our house mother at Almetris. Absolutely. Kept us sane. We cried on her shoulder many a night. In fact, in April or March when the Kappa Alpha Fraternity, that's the old South people, the Sons of the South, would have their Old South Ball and they would ride on horses down Whitis Avenue dressed in confederate uniforms to deliver the invitations to their dates at the various dormitories. Mama Duren would tell us, girls be in this house by 5:30. If you have a class, because we would have lab classes at night sometimes. If you have a lab class you stay there in that lab class. You stay in that building until eight o'clock. Don't walk down Whitis Avenue by yourself.

The first year we were like Mama Duren what was going on, she tells us it's the Old South Bowl. They would ride those horses and call us the N-word and they would also throw frozen chickens at Whitis and Almetris and sometimes they would break the windows. That's why she wanted us in and we could not be toward the front of the house when they came down. They'd throw these frozen chickens and they break the windows. Here's the thing that when you look back at it, it just pisses you off to this day. The university knew they were going to do this literally within the hour. The maintenance crews from the university would show up to replace our windows. Now they would replace the windows, but they wouldn't tell them to stop doing that. But Mama Duren, let me tell you that woman was a saint. She was a saint and we all loved her. I came and supported the legacy of her. I have my little legacy thing from her when the dorm opened. They don't make them like that.

Davis: I can't even imagine what it's like to have to go to school, concentrate on your studies. The only Black person in the room, while going through that outside of class and having whole frozen chickens just chucked at you.

Gaskin: Oh yeah, we were terrorized. Literally we were terrorized. Not to mention a few of our sorority sisters, were told by professors on the first day of class when they'd see their little dark faces in the class, I'd like to see you after class and tell them, "You need to go enroll in another section, because I don't teach N's and I have tenure, so there's nothing you can do about it."

Davis: It's just so crazy to me how people's ignorance can be so, even to this day their ignorance can be not only limiting to others.

Gaskin: But is limiting to them.

Davis: Well, yeah. Very self limiting, very close minded.

Gaskin: My mother always told us. She said, anyone who doesn't appreciate you, who chooses to discriminate against you because of who you are. She said, "You don't have a problem. They have a

problem and they are missing something special by not taking the time to get to know who you are." That was like, okay, you got a problem here. We were terrorized and Mama Duren, she kept us on an even keel. She's a wonderful, just a wonderful woman. I thought then was, what are we going to do about this? Universities let us in and most of the Black people there were valedictorians and salutatorians. They were three top I was from a small town and small school. That the kids from Dallas and Houston things were all Jones and Worthing Scholarship winners and valedictorians and salutatorians. This was smart and you look and you see what some of them have accomplished in life.

Davis: Well, I would have loved the opportunity to meet Mama Duren. If I'm correct they named the building after her, didn't they?

Gaskin: Yes, there's a dormitory named after her and it's a very technologically superior dormitory. It's a beautiful dorm. When we were there for Black Homecoming in 2016, I think, we had a tour. They gave us a tour of the campus, because that was the 50th anniversary of the first Black students that entered undergraduate. We had a tour of the campus and one of the stops on the tour. No, that wasn't for Black Homecoming. That was when Delta Xi celebrated its 50th anniversary, so it was in 2009, it was in 2009. We went on a tour of Duren Hall. It's open wide on Saturdays it's really, really beautiful dormitory.

Davis: I really need to visit that too for research. I actually stayed in Moore-Hill, so that was directly in front of Jester.

Gaskin: Old Dorm, that used to be when I was there, it was the athletic dorm.

Davis: That's what I hear. I hear that most of the football players stayed in Moore-Hill which it's like, I can't even conceive that because it's such a tiny dorm, especially compared to some of the luxury housing that they have on campus.

Gaskin: Oh, yeah. When my brother went, he stayed in Jester and he didn't even stay there a whole semester. He was so rotten. He told my parents I can't live in this dorm, I'm not used, he was the baby of the family. I'm not used to having roommates and it's too noisy. So they paid off his dorm contract, drove to Austin and brought his car, and got him an apartment. I'm like, "You didn't do that for me."

Davis: I always feel like the older siblings get the short end of the stick and it is.

Gaskin: Absolutely, yeah. They say they didn't have any more money, he was the last one, so they still had a little money left. Basically going to spend it on his boy.

Davis: Wouldn't mind speaking to the legacy of the Delta Xi Chapter and its members and what would you like the community at large to know about the Delta Xi Chapter?

Gaskin: Well, the Delta Xi Chapter has produced women of significant accomplishment. Doctor Anita Mitchell. Well, let me start that before Anita. We have a couple of graduates who remember the movie "Hidden Figures"? We have a couple of Delta Xi graduates who when they graduated, were recruited by NASA and worked for IBM and were taught programming and they worked at NASA on missions. Just like you saw. Gloria Grant was one, she is now deceased. Joyce Messengiel was another. But they were brilliant. Both of them were applied math majors and they worked at NASA. Both of them worked at NASA until they were retired. They did a lot of computations for a lot of space flights. I don't know if she's still a judge but she was a judge in Dallas, Vonciel Jones. Then we had, let's see. There's a judge

here in Fort Bend County. Her name is Toni Rencher Wallace. She is a sitting judge here in Fort Bend County. We produced a lot of doctors and lawyers and women in business. Arlene Lawson, who was initiated in 1967, retired as the Executive Director of the ExxonMobil Foundation. Now, you know that being in the non-profit world, that's like sitting on top of everything because that's a huge foundation and she was the Executive Director. We had quite a few women of accomplishment. Mia Knight Wright is the co-pastor of a ten thousand plus member church here in Houston and Mia I think is from Houston originally. But we have women who accomplished much more. Some of them were first in their fields but we always pushed each other. We strive to be excellent at whatever we do. It was expected. They told us when you come into Delta Xi Chapter, we expect you to not only contribute to the sorority but we expect you to contribute to the community at large. Hopefully, that legacy is still—

There's a woman who is still in Houston, Jackie. I'm looking at her face and I can't. She and her husband are big supporters of the university and she was a Delta Xi member. They are philanthropists. Jackie Hawkins, yes. They are philanthropist and they do a lot. What I would like for people to know about Delta Xi is that not only were we the first African-American Greek organization chartered on the campus but we also contributed, I think, to the university and to the richness of the university. Whether the university and it took the university a while to realize that. The other thing I'd like for people to know because they can contribute to this is that there is a Delta Xi scholarship that is managed for us by the Ex-Students Association. That scholarship, we raised the initial money for that scholarship in two years and the university matched it and to endow it. That's an endowed scholarship. We are continuing the legacy of Delta Xi being of service to all man and womankind.

Davis: I've seen a lot of instances where Black people together and really do grassroots efforts to really boost.

Gaskin: With purpose, yes.

Davis: It's really inspiring, especially since it's Black women.

Gaskin: Yes.

Gaskin: Yeah, we're special, aren't we?

Davis: We have a little something, something. Please speak to your experiences courting, living, and socializing on or around campus.

Gaskin: Well, dating. We dated guys from Huston-Tillotson, it wasn't that many. First of all, when I was there, there were 125 Black people, and I think about 80 of us were women so the dating pool was very small. A lot of us had boyfriends at Prairie View or Texas Southern and we'd see them on the weekend sometimes. I actually met my first husband at The University of Texas. He was a business student. Well, he was working on his MBA. He was probably one of the first African Americans to receive an MBA at The University of Texas. When I met him, we dated and got married. We didn't have any children. We didn't stay married that long. I think we stayed married three or four years. Anyway, but we met at The University of Texas. Dating was not a big deal. That was not the scene I was in. I really was trying to get the hell out of The University of Texas. I graduated in three and a half years. It was like, I don't have time for this. No, I'm not going to lie, we did party, we had a good time.

I'm going to take a detour here because I just have to say this. I find all this controversy about the Eyes of Texas, just a bunch of BS quite frankly. I don't know. There are things that we need to be concerned about, that song is not one of them. I grew up singing, I've been working on the railroad, all the live long day. That song itself was a song that slaves used to communicate when they were going to be leaving and when they were going to run off so that song has a richer background now. It was performed in a minstrel show. Well, hell if you do away with everything that was performed in a minstrel show, you won't have a body of American work. I'm concerned about the Black students at The University of Texas who are not graduating in four years. I'm concerned that we have still around five percent enrollment. I'm not concerned about the Eyes of Texas. Hell if you don't want to sing it, don't sing it. Don't do that. I call them Black Panther wannabes. Folks are searching for something to protest and I just think we could borrow to something else. I got that off my chest, not a topic for this conversation, but thank you for letting me say it.

Davis: I think it's relevant. I think that's a very good point.

Gaskin: To say it in a little more plain manner, as we used to say at the telephone company, we are worried about ants and the alligators eating our answers.

Davis: We'll go ahead and move on to B2. How has your experience with the Delta Xi Chapter impacted your skillset? How has it affected your approach to your community?

Gaskin: Well, this sorority is very big on teaching young members how to serve. What I'm going to tell you I learned was how people can help others and the example that will sit by the graduate chapter members toward us. If you were the treasurer of Delta Xi Chapter, the treasurer of Beta Xi Omega Chapter worked with you to make sure you knew how to do your job in the sorority. If you were the president, the president of Beta Xi Omega would work with you. They also saw that when we were in leadership in the undergraduate chapter, they made sure that we went to regional conferences and that we went to our national meeting, which is called Boule , every two years. They knew we didn't have any money. Remember transportation back then, people didn't go get on a plane and fly places, we did a lot of driving and so we would ride with them if the regional conference was in Dallas.

The women in Beta Xi Omega would say, how many of you are going to go? If you were an officer, they would pay for you to go and we would stay in the room with them when we got there. The things that I learned, I learned about leadership. I learned how to pour into people lessons and how to share with others how to extend yourself. I think that was probably the best lesson that I've learned being a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha. Also, we learned what it was to be a part of something that was bigger than us. When we look at the programs at Alpha Kappa Alpha be at the Mississippi helped project, the purchase of the Martin Luther King. Now Martin Luther King was assassinated when I was an undergraduate in 1968. Subsequent to that, after I graduated, Alpha Kappa Alpha actually purchased the King home to make sure that it would always be preserved and have a place in history. These are things that you learn how to do and you learn an appreciation for your history and you also learn how to share of yourself, your resources, your time. It's a big picture. Now, what did I learn from Delta Xi itself? Delta Xi saved a lot of us from going crazy because we had sisters that we could just go hang out with, in their rooms or wherever. It was a family away from your family. You can't beat that. I still have a couple of my line sisters, that we are still very close to this day. Two of us are here in Houston. We're not even in the same chapter but we're close. Linda is in Waco. But she's back and forth in Houston all the time because she's a hardcore political activist.

Davis: Just some of the skill sets that you've learned and how this has affected your past too completely.

Gaskin: That's a big question, probably one of the best things that I learned was a lesson born out of something that happened to me early on at the university. I got spit on and I call my dad and said, "You got to come get me. I can't do this. I cannot do this." Now, let me back up. Daddy knew what I was going to face. He took me and enrolled me in Reverend Bill Lawson's nonviolent protest school in Houston and Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church where they prepared us to go sit in at counters and all that sort of thing. When you do that, people call you the N-word and worse. They spit on you. They do all this stuff so you get prepared to not strike back. Anyway, I got spit on coming out of Batts Hall. No one had ever treated me like that. I was a cherished child.

The woman spit on me, the girl spit on me. One of the things we learned was a bully cannot deal with someone who comes back at them. He said, "One of the things if somebody spits on, you two things you should do. One, your instinct is to reach and wipe it off. Don't do that. Because that very act transfers power to the person who spit on you because you are now acknowledging the bad act. Don't touch it. At least don't touch it in their sight." Then, how she said it, "Why do you N's want to go to school with us? We don't want you here." I'm holding my books trying out to wipe this spit off which is running down my face and I hollered back at her and I said, "I didn't come here to go to school with you. I don't know you, get out of my way." First of all, my knees were like jelly and it was all I could do. Batts Hall is right there you have to go up those steps and across the mall, and Almetris Dorm was a long way away from there. I started walking away and she jumped back enough so that I made it through. I got as far as the chemistry building and I couldn't go any further. I just leaned against the building and I just started crying and I slid down to the ground and I think I probably cried for five or 10 minutes and I'm talking an ugly cry. Do you know not one person stopped to say, "Are you okay, what's wrong?" I was sure enough boo-hooing. If you had walked by, you'd have known something was wrong.

I make it to Almetris. I get up, make it to Almetris. I called my dad Collect and I said, "You got to come get me." This is what happened. My dad was a labor union organizer. He's a tough guy. He said, "She spit on you?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Well, that's probably the worst thing that's going to happen to you. You good." [LAUGHTER] I said, "You're not going to come get me?" He said, "You good." I went in Ms. Duren's room. I boo-hooed some more, she made me a cup of tea. I wiped my eyes and did my homework. Got up and went to class the next day. What's the lesson that I learned? The lesson that I learned is, if you had some bit of adversity throwing you off your goal, you will never be successful at anything. Because success is the best form of revenge. It really is. If you think that you can spit on me and call me names and I'm going to fold my tent and leave. Wrong. I'm here. You got a problem with it? Not my problem. What I learned was just don't crumble. Just don't crumble, figure out. It may have had some effect on me that I'm not aware of.

But I think I've been pretty successful in my career. I've had a couple of careers. When I was at the phone company, I had a guy who got promoted and the vice president called me in and he said, "I just want you to know that you didn't get promoted because you were Black." I'm like, "Why is this man telling me this?" I just looked at him, I said, well, this much I know. Even if I was promoted because I was Black I'm not going to keep this job because I'm Black. I'm going to keep this job because I'm going to do it better than anybody else. Is that why you called me and he said yes, and I said may I be excused I have something to do, I have work to do. You just develop a shell to deal with the world. If I learned any lessons at The University of Texas and through my association in Delta Xi chapter, it's that I'm a whole lot stronger than I thought I was. If I can help another Black woman, Black man, Black child, get that self-confidence to charge forth and ignore the naysayers and the doomsday people. What is your goal? What

goal do you have? What do you have to do to get there? You cannot let negativity—negativity will absolutely do you in and prevent you from reaching your goal. That's what I learned. I think it's a simple lesson, but I think it stays with me still.

Davis: Gosh. Wow.

Gaskin: I'm looking at your face you are like.

Davis: I find that I'm a very empathetic person. I'm like a germaphobe too, so that would just freak me out. Personally, I would swing, but I know that at the time—

Gaskin: Well, if I had swung at her, I would have been expelled from the university and she would not have been. Who wins that? Think about this. Michelle Obama tells the story, and Michelle Obama is a lot younger than I, more than a decade younger than I. She tells a story when she went to Princeton as an undergrad. There was a white girl who was supposed to be her roommate and her mother said, "Oh, no, this is not happening. Move that girl out." Here is the thing, I know how I am with my first roommate. That little girl could have gone to the White House and visited if she had gotten to know Michelle Obama, Michelle Robinson at the time. I bet she and her mother looked at that and said, and that's an example of sweet revenge, success. You didn't want to be my roommate. I'm still going to graduate from Princeton, go to Harvard Law. Meet this man, marry him and become First Lady of the United States. What did you do to me? What were you trying to accomplish?

Now, think about this. This is the year 2021. I'm talking to you about some things that have happened back in the 1960s, 56 years ago. My daughter, who is also a member of the sorority. She went to SMU undergrad, and she went to Cornell Law. She is a partner at a firm, but she also teaches at South Texas College of Law. She got this letter from one of her students who said what an inspiration Morgan had been to her in her studies, and she took a class from Morgan and asked if Morgan would consider hooding her at their graduation ceremony. The last line of her letter was I cannot explain to you how much it meant to be taught by someone who looks like me. When you say Michelle Obama was relatable. Still back then we didn't have anybody at the university except Mama Duren who looked like us. I never took a class from an African-American professor. We didn't have African-American Studies there. It's important to have somebody that you can relate to, that you know has probably gone through some of the same, not all the same things, but some of the same things.

Davis: Great. This is great stuff. If you wouldn't mind, we can move on to the next question if you're ready? If you could please talk a little bit about your life on campus. I know we already covered where you lived, but feel free to reiterate that if it feels like. How did being a part of Delta Xi chapter significantly impact your experience on campus?

Gaskin: Let me tell you what they used to tell us. When I first started, they were 38,000 people enrolled at the university. I told to the wrong 125 Black people because they said, if you're walking across campus and you see a Black person, please speak because you may not see another one for a week. That was true. What was it like? The first week I was there, I remember calling my mom saying, I think I have polio. She said, polio. Why do you think you have polio? I said my legs my hurt. Well, I had never walked so much because I did have a car when I was at home. I drove to school. I had two hours walking and plus Austin is hilly. I'm from the Gulf Coast. It's flat as a pancake down there, but I was walking up and down those hills and I had a couple of classes in a building called the BEB, Business-Economics Building. I actually, this is fun, took a class with Lynda Bird Johnson. We took the same history class. This was in

BEB 100 where the class was and her name was Johnson and so was my name. Well, when the professor, I think he was a TA, had us sitting in alphabetical order. Well, of course the secret service were there with her. She had a row to herself. Then there was the secret service agent in the row behind her. Then I sat three seats over from that secret service agent. Her name was Lynda Johnson and my name is Pam Johnson. One day she said something to me and I said, "Well, we're probably cousins." The look of horror on her face, "Sure we are."

Anyway, we used to have that kind of fun with people. My roommate was an art major and she convinced me to take a class in the theater department. She and I took this theater class, theatrical makeup, which was a very interesting class. The class was from 4:00 to 5:30 on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and we were doing beards. Then we actually had to apply beards to ourselves. Ruth and I did these beards. On the way back to where we lived it was cold. We had our coats on and we had scarves. We were walking along Sorority Road, where all the sorority houses are. When we see these little girls who were white girls and we open up our coats and go, "Aargh," and we had these big beards. Now, why did I just think of that silly little thing that we did, but anyway, we just make up stuff, just silly little stuff, but I guess I have some memories that are fond and fun. That's one of them. We scared the hell out of those girls.

Then there were the parties at the Alpha house. Those were some of the good parties. Then we would go over to Huston-Tillotson. Now, at that time, when I was there, everybody had curfews. We even had curfews at UT, believe it or not. Our curfew was 11:30 during the week and 1:00 on Friday nights and Saturday nights. Well, here's until Austin's curfew was 9:30 during the week and 11:00 on Friday night and Saturday night. Yeah, I know. We would go hang out over there and then we'd come back. By the time we got back to UT. Now, I'm going to tell this because it's not a sorority secret, but it was one of the fun things that happened. When we were pledging, yes, we were hazed, but it wasn't this vicious mean hazing. It was stupid hazing. One of the hazing things that they did to us, they blindfolded us and took us to that cemetery over in East Austin on either East 11th, or East 12th. They spread us out in the cemetery and told us to count to 50 or something. Then we had to sing ourselves back together. You take your blindfold off and then you realize, oh, my God, I'm in the cemetery. They had us sitting on somebody's tombstone. Then we had to get back to campus. Then we had to actually walk to campus back. That was one of the things. The other thing was Littlefield Fountain. At 2:30 in the morning, they took us over the Littlefield Fountain and we had to put some Joy dishwashing liquid and it would give all these bubbles. We had to go get up on those horses and say here we are. They stayed in. We were all dressed in black. If campus police stopped you and asked you who are, tell them Delta Sigma Theta. Horrible. Anyway, we did it. We had a good time.

Davis: That sounds like a lot of fun. Although a little bit risky. About how far away was that cemetery from the university?

Gaskin: Girl. It was a couple of miles. If you go up 11th Street, cross I-35. I-35 was not configured like it is now. It wasn't as many lanes and all of it, but you still had to cross. You had to walk across. Yes. A few miles. You go across. You probably went down maybe a mile, half a mile or so and the cemetery was over on the right-hand side. It's still over there by the way. Because I passed there the last time I was in Austin.

Davis: I love passing by cemeteries. I always wave to the spirits and I hold my breath.

Gaskin: Yes.

Davis: It was bottom breathe went in.

Gaskin: I know. We have some friends that we travel with and whenever we go places we just like to take just little walkings. Just strike out walking to us. We were in New York a few years ago. We were getting ready to go to Europe. We were going to fly out of New York, but we spent three days in New York. Here we are. We're just walking around Manhattan and we were walking over to Wall Street. I looked over and we're passing by a church and I saw Hamilton. The name on this big tombstone. I said wait a minute. We walked across the street and sure enough it was Alexander Hamilton's grave. There is this beautiful old church sitting right there near Wall Street. It's a historical church. That's where he was buried. Not only was Hamilton buried, there were several other people, notables were buried there. Cemeteries are just little windows into the past.

Davis: It's section six. Yes. The long part is over. For this last section, we do want to focus on the process of story making. We want to be on the lookout for those little known our vanishing ways of life. We do want to keep an eye out for historical events. We want to explain smells, places, settings in detail. Just as it comes. What was it like being a Black woman in the '60s, '70s, '80s during and after the segregation at the University of Texas? You might have experienced segregation as a little girl. What was it like during that transition especially at UT? What can you tell us about that?

Gaskin: As a Black woman, what do we always worry about? We worry about our hair. It was straightened either chemically or via heat. The first thing to worry about is, okay, I'm going to go to Austin and go to school. How do I get my hair done? That's a big deal. Well, we knew we would have to go over to East Austin to get our hair done. We found out that there were two places that most of the girls at UT went and we also asked girls at Huston-Tillotson. See, that's the other thing. I'm going digress here. We made community with people from Huston-Tillotson because this was the next largest. They were a larger group of Black people than we were and most of us knew people at HT, that's what we call it. We had classmates at HT. We asked them, "Where are we going to get our hair done?" We went to this great place called Trudy's over in East Austin and she did our hair and she also model us a bit. Trudy was trying to get us to date her nephew. No, Trudy we're not going to date him. We got the hair thing taken care of. Then, just as a young Black woman who, our parents, we are all sheltered. Our parents didn't let us date until we were 16-17 years old. When you need to go out with a group of folks no, you keep yourself at home. Be the good girl.

We're used to hanging out in groups and it was just a lot of fun. There was a place on the Drag that had Nighthawk Restaurant. Was it Nighthawk? Nighthawk Restaurant was one of the only places that would serve Black people. When the first African-Americans got there. By the time we got there, we could eat at pretty much anywhere. Now what we couldn't do was go to the movie theater that was there on the Drag. We used to protest over there. We knew they wouldn't sell us a ticket, so we would get about 20 people and we get in line. We get to the window and she said, "I can't sell you a ticket, " and we'd say "Okay." The next person would come up so we'd just take up all their time. Eventually, after about two months and a half, the company that owned them went on and integrated the movie theater and so we could go to the movie theater. But we just did a lot of hanging out in there. We got our hair done. We looked cute. We'd shop. There was a store called Scarborough's Department Store and it's downtown. We'll go there. Scarborough's had a nice lunch room. They used to serve very upscale lunches. When we were doing AKA stuff, we would go put on our finest pink and green and go have a Scarborough's sandwich. The Driskill Hotel, we go to the Driskill and have lunch at the Driskill. Those kind of things that was fun. Are you going to study vocal opera?

Davis: Yes, I was a vocal performance opera major for a while and so was my twin sister. We grew up singing together and harmonizing since we were two.

Gaskin: But you were in the spirit of Barbara Smith. Have you studied her?

Davis: No, I haven't.

Gaskin: You must look up Barbara Smith. Barbara Conrad Smith. She was one of the first African-Americans in 1956 at the University of Texas. She was a vocal performance major. She won the lead in the Spring Opera. The Speaker of the House of the Texas Legislature called the president of the university, and told him that you let that N sing lead, we're going to cut off your funds. Anyway? Oh, yes. Harry Belafonte found out about this, and told Barbara he would pay for her to go anywhere. The Berklee School, wherever. She said, "No, my parents pay taxes in this state, and I am going to finish here, " because I think she was in her third year. Anyway, she went on to become a world renowned opera singer. Look her up, her story, and the university finally recognized her as an outstanding alumni back in 2005, '06, '07, '08, somewhere up in there. But I also ask you that, because one of my line sisters who is deceased, Shirley Tennyson McPhatter. She was Shirley Tennyson at that time, was a vocal performance major. If you go online to YouTube, and input Shirley McPhatter. She did shows of Billie Holiday. Oh my goodness, this woman's—

Davis: Pipes.

Gaskin: Yes, you look her when you need to be inspired. But she was my line sister, she was Delta Xi, 1966. She was just fabulous, anyway, we really digress didn't we? One of the things that I did, this kind of ties back to you too, so we're going to take it to opera here for one minute. I have always loved that, my parents encouraged us to like all kinds of music. There was something about opera that I always drew me, and I think it's the stories. When I was working here in Houston, and I told you community service is always the thing, and I'm always looking for a way to tie Black people in to experience, and give our Black children more experience.

I had always had season tickets to the Houston Grand Opera. I had about two tickets, I had my two daughters, and I take one. I couldn't afford to buy three tickets, I probably could have, but I didn't want to spend the money, and I take one of them the one show, and one of them to the other. Then I could always, and I found out that I could go be in a docent with the opera, and I became a school docent. I told them I wanted to go to the predominantly Black schools to introduce opera to those students, and I take my little boombox, and I go in, and I went to Woodridge High School out here, which is predominately Black. They had a fabulous band. As a world renowned band, nationally known band, they were in the Rose Bowl parade. I'm going there, they were going to come to the opera, they are going to come see Carmen, and so I take my little boombox, and so I've started out I said "How many of you like opera?" It was a room full of Black kids and they were like, "Oh my God." So I hit my boombox, and I played Aaron Copland's from Rodeo, beef—it was in the commercial "beef, it's what's for dinner." And they're like, "That's not an opera, that's a song on a commercial." I know, and I told them what that was. Then I played something else, and they were like, "Oh!"

Then I played some stuff from cartoons, because all the cartoons use classical music. Something from the Road Runner, and they are like, "Oh that's opera now", so then when I had really sucked them in. I played summertime because their band played Summertime. It was one of their showpieces. They're

like that's Summertime. I said yes, but that is from the opera Porgy and Bess, which was the only opera written about Black people set in the United States. They were like this opera may not be so bad. It's like my mother used to tell us. We tell her we don't like something. She'd fix something. We'd say we don't like that. She'd say, well, you're going to have to eat some. Then you're going to have to tell me why you don't like it. She said, because you can't just say you don't like something if you've never tried. You have to be able to say, I don't like peas because I don't like the way they feel in my mouth. But you just can't say I don't like peas. Well, have you ever had peas? No, but I don't like them. No, that was not acceptable. I felt like that about opera. Operatic music just speaks to your soul. It's from a very deep place.

Davis: The amount of technical skill that goes into projecting your voice even without a mic, that's a whole workout. That's a work out. Just abs. I have since lost my abs.

Gaskin: The posture. You have to have the correct posture, because you have to free up your diaphragm. The other thing is we try to create little boxes for our selves. We're Black people. We don't like opera. Who said Black people don't like opera? I'm Black, I like opera. Have you ever listened to opera? The worst cages that we have are the cages that we build for ourselves. But it's just a form of music. We listen to everything. The other thing too, when I went to high school and elementary school, we were introduced to all of that in the little poor Black school. But our English teacher took us to the Alley Theater to see plays in Houston. She took us to the performance hall. It wasn't Jones Hall at the time, and it wasn't the Wortham either. I don't even remember where the opera was performing. But she would take us to operas, and we had to do these projects on this stuff. Once you learn the stories, it's great.

Davis: It's just beautiful.

Gaskin: It is.

Davis: There's just some melodies, and I just could not get enough. Unfortunately, my funding for school fell through. I was like, well, let me change my major so I can get a job. I'm so glad that you love opera as much as I do. That's super cool. Then we just have this last question. It's just basically, anything that you'd like to share about your experience in the Delta Xi Chapter. Any closing points.

Gaskin: I'm thankful to the women, the teachers that I had who were members of Alpha Kappa Alpha. I got an Alpha Kappa Alpha scholarship when I graduated from high school. I'm really making you jealous right now, because that scholarship was \$250 and it paid for two semesters, fees and intuition. It was a \$175 a semester. But I'm thankful to the women. I had a cousin who went to the University of Denver, who was ahead of me. She pledged at the University of Denver in 1960. Even she told me, she says, when you go to college, you're going to be in AKA. There was only one thing that I was going to do. But just being a part of something where you had sisterhood, everyone was committed to excellence. We helped each other. I could write. Math was not my strong suit. I did okay, but we had Gloria Grant, who I told you, who was a hidden figure. She would help us with the math. I would help folks with that. We had people who spoke languages, Black women who spoke languages, and they could help us with that foreign language.

We learned how to lean and depend on each other. The lessons that you get from that stand you in good stead, because you know that you don't have to do it by yourself. You're not in all alone. That's the legacy that I think Delta Xi has. A lot of us are accomplished. A lot of woman who were in Delta Sigma

Theta, they are very accomplished women and have gone on to do great things. Quite frankly, I think that we supported each other. We weren't catty Black women. We didn't have this, oh you are Delta, you're not. We were proud of each other, and I see Carolyn gifts from time to time. She was a member of Delta Sigma Theta at the university. We laugh and talk about living in Almetris and Whitis. She lived in Whitis. I lived in Almetris. In fact, the Deltas mostly lived in Whitis and the AKAs lived in Almetris, so we used say we have our own sorority houses. But we were proud of each other, because we were Black women. I don't think that had I gone to Spelman, because it would have been an all African-American environment that I would have truly appreciated my sisters as much as when we face the things that we faced and we supported each other to get through. God has a reason for doing everything, and I'm thankful that I was selected and invited to join. I have endeavored to live up to that legacy.

I will tell you that one of my accomplishments that I'm proud of is in 1978, I met a lady in my neighborhood. I found out she was a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha. We didn't have a chapter out here in Fort Bend County. She and I started the Mu Kappa Omega chapters. I'm a charter member and founding member of that, to keep that legacy going. One of my line sisters, I invited her to come in and join us. She lived out here and she was a charter member as well. One woman that I went from fifth grade through 12th grade with, and then she went to Huston-Tillotson and I was at UT. She also became a charter member of Mu Kappa Omega. That's one of the things, to carry that torch forward, I've been privileged to do.

Davis: I'm speaking to a charter member right now. Well, I love that for you. I love that you took the time to share your experience with me. It feeds my soul to know that Black women are successful in this world, and that they do it by sticking together. Thank you.

Gaskin: Glad I've been able to help.