Jannette Domingo Interview November 12, 2014

This interview was conducted on October 31, 2014 by Anisa Knox '15 and Davis Logan '16 with Dr. Jannette Domingo '70. AK denotes Anisa Knox, DL denotes Davis Logan and JD denotes Dr. Jannette Domingo. The transcription is word for word with two exceptions, unnecessary conversational words such as "um," "so," and other expressions used in conversation have been edited for readability and clarity. Additionally, false starts, both on the part of the interviewer and Dr. Domingo were withdrawn to preserve the coherence of the conversation.

DL: Today is October 31, 2014. I'm Davis Logan here in the BCC with Anisa Knox and Dr. Jannette Domingo, who is the Class of '69.

JD: Actually Class of '70.

DL: Okay, okay. First of all, Could you tell us about the...actually first of all, I want to thank you for coming here. We definitely do appreciate you guys coming to talk to us about perhaps one of the most significant events to happen on Swarthmore's campus in recent history.

JD: You're very welcome.

DL: Could you tell us about your application process as you came to Swarthmore and what your early experiences were?

JD: The application process...That was a long time ago. (Laughing) I don't really remember doing the application. I do remember that I went to a selective public high school in New York City. There was a lot of help in terms of directing students towards competitive colleges, selective colleges. But I do remember that there was also quite a bit of envy when I got into Swarthmore that was kind of odd. I remember a lot more about the admissions interview, that part of it. I actually came to college for an interview and my mother came with me. I was interviewed by the then Dean of Women, Barbara Pearson Lange.[1] It turned into a very interesting experience in terms of the discussion I had with my mother afterwards. Dean Lange was very proud of her father, who had been not only a Swarthmore professor but also the first civilian governor of the Virgin Islands. So my family is from the Virgin Islands. This became a conversation between Dean Lange and my mother. But afterwards, my mother told me that

[1] Barbara Pearson Lange. Mrs. Lange was the daughter of Paul Pearson, the first civilian governor of the Virgin Islands and a former professor at Swarthmore.

Governor Pearson had not been a very popular governor at all and he was seen as being very paternalistic in bringing the, what was then called the Chautauqua Circuit, of bringing culture to the masses, which is something he had done in the United States. But when you bring the culture to the masses in the islands and your culture is European culture and they have their own culture, it doesn't quite work perhaps in the way that he intended it to. So that added to his or detracted from his popularity which was already low for other reasons. It was really interesting that Dean Lange, Pearson Lange had one idea of her father and what she and Swarthmore were bringing to the masses, as it were, yet my mother was giving me another view of how liberal good intentions are not always respectful of the people to whom they're addressed. That was kind of like an indication that, okay, I understand. This is a wonderful liberal institution but it has its shortcomings. Even as an 18 year old, I had already experienced that in my own liberal high school. It was interesting.

DL: Did that inform how you viewed Swarthmore as you were in your first few years, first two years?

JD: I think it put me on guard in the sense that knowing that Swarthmore considered itself to have a very liberal tradition but that there were definitely limitations to that tradition and limitations that the administrators and faculty were not necessarily aware of but that would be evident to people of color, and that proved to be the case.

DL: Can you then tell us how you came to be involved with SASS?

JD: SASS...Again, I don't have the kind of memory where I can tell you point by point and day by day. But, I can tell you about how it felt to be here and how it felt to be a part of SASS. SASS was kind of like the way we survived at Swarthmore. We spent a lot of time together. Some of the black students spent a lot of time together; doing everything from eating together, studying together, talking about issues together, and SASS really sort of grew out of that organically. Particularly the women students that I was most close to, there was always some issue, always something to be discussed and ultimately we realized that we needed to be organized in order to address any sort of issue with any kind of hope of effectiveness.

DL: Let's see. So...were you one of the students enrolled in the Black Philosophies of Liberation course?

JD: Let's see...I don't remember a course by that name. I did take some of the courses that added up to the Black Studies concentration. That particular name doesn't ring a bell. I may have been in the class; I just don't remember it that way. Do you know who taught that class?

DL: Actually it was a student-run course created by the students of SASS and some of the subjects were liberation, nationalism, integration, colonialism...

JD: I don't recall. I feel like I'm testifying. I do not recall. I may have been there but I do not recall.

DL: So, how about classes with professors such as Asmarom Legesse? Can you tell us about those classes?

JD: Professor Legesse was the only black professor at the time. At the time he said he was from Ethiopia but in fact he was from Eritrea, which is now independent of Ethiopia or viewed as a separate country. I felt it was really important to be able to have a class with him. I remember that classes were held in his home, in the way that honors classes were held in professor's homes at the time. I remember the class more for his presence and for his interest in the students and for the fact that his expertise in Africa was something that was rare at the college. He was an important figure in that sense, in being the only black professor, the only African on campus at the time. That's what I remember particularly about his class, that it was the one. He was the one. Fortunately, he was one who did take an interest in black students. Being the one, doesn't automatically mean that the faculty member or staff member will feel that it is his or her responsibility or feel a kinship with black students. But fortunately, he did.

DL: Did the students feel like other than classes with Professor Legesse there were other aspects of the black experience in America or other things that needed to be addressed by the education in the college that perhaps they had to create for themselves in some ways?

JD: One of the things we were instrumental in getting to Swarthmore was a Professor Leonard Barrett, you may have heard about; he was from Temple.[2] He taught a course, it was on social

[2] Dr. Leonard E. Barrett, professor of religion at Temple University, authored Soul-Force: African heritage in Afro-American Religion (1974) and The Rastafarians (1988).

change and a lot of the discussion was about what were then called millennial movements, charismatic leadership in millennial movements. It was a time when people [were] just beginning talking about Rastafari. That was one of the things he talked about. One of the most important things for us or deficiencies for us as black students at Swarthmore was the fact that the curriculum did not include very much at all about Africa or about the African diaspora. It was a part [of] the standard elite college canon at the time that was Europe; it was European-based. All cultural values were European-based. We really felt the need to try to bring black professors even if they were just visiting professors, to take advantage of whatever course we could take with Professor Legesse, to go to Lincoln University and take a course over there if we could, some people I think went into Pennsylvania into UPENN to take courses, so we really were pretty active to trying to supplement the curriculum with courses and coursework with our own studies about Africa and the African diaspora.

DL: What was your sense of the leadership structure of SASS and the roles that each member would play?

JD: It was an interesting structure, if you want to call it that. I would describe it as having sort of an inner caucus of leaders and then also another layer of representatives who for example during the takeover the people who were most visible, who spoke to the college as a whole, who became the people who were quoted in the media were not the same people who were writing the message, who were debating what the message should be. There were different layers of leadership. Most of the leadership was interestingly enough female and most of the representatives were male. A reflection of the times in the sense that, Black women felt that it was very important to have Black men be visible in leadership roles. These visible roles were ceded to male students whereas the inner workings of the organization where the decisions were being made was much more dominated by the female students. There was [were] some male students involved in that but it was mainly dominated by the female students. It was, perhaps was unusual among student movements during the time or maybe perhaps some of these movements had the same thing, where we were strong advocates about the ways in which black males had been undermined historically. We were very cognizant of the possibilities of creating visible male leadership. So you have that sort of interesting dichotomy in SASS: where women were much more powerful leaders internally and that was not necessarily visible to the outside.

DL: So could you explain the planning of the nonviolent direct action of the occupation of Parrish Hall?

JD: Hmm, well I can give you a few tidbits. Again, interestingly enough, it's not something that I've talked a lot about over the last several decades. First, I really want to emphasize the fact that it was not something that happened suddenly and could not have happened suddenly, and by that I mean that over the course of several years, black students had worked together on a lot of different projects, had socialized together, had debated politics together, had really formed a community.[3] And so it was because we had that trust in each other that we were able to have almost every black student buy into this very unusual - for Swarthmore - very unusual kind of direct action. We didn't have saboteurs; we didn't have people who were bad-mouthing us… I think maybe, as I recall maybe two people did not participate. And they just didn't participate. They didn't do anything disruptive. So the [that] getting to the point where such an action could be taken was based on those several years of creating courses, traveling together to other schools to take courses, singing gospel songs in the cafeteria all those kinds of things that bonded us politically and socially. And as a result of that we were able to plan the takeover, I remember there were some meetings in New York over the holidays, a few of us who lived in New York, but before we broke for the holidays, it was discussion that we needed to take this action. So, and I can't give you a blow by blow, but what I think it is very important for you to include in your thoughts and your perceptions of this event is that it really was more than an event and it really was the result of having created that kind of community that was able to take an action. I think that is really important as we look back at that event and think about well what are the possibilities today in terms of black student activism and what would it require for current students to get to a point where they can take any kind of action as a group? It doesn't just happen. It doesn't just happen. It happens as a result of creating a base, creating a community. So, that's really what I would like to say about that.

DL: Alright, so what did you guys do during the time inside of Parrish Hall?

JD: Aaah (thinking). I don't… well… we did our homework (laughs). I personally had a lot of work to do. A lot of people were, a lot of the participants were graduating and no one wanted to delay their graduation because they hadn't been able to complete their courses. I don't remember how many courses I was taking, but I was taking a lot of classes, because at the end of my sophomore year, I decided I was going to graduate the following year so I was doing two

[3] SASS was formed in the fall 1966, three years before the organized direct action/occupation of Parrish Hall.

years in one. So, you know, do the math. So there was a lot of homework being done in there a lot of regular assignments getting done. That was one thing and another thing, of course, we did a lot of our writing, group writing, writing by committee, of statements. So there was a lot of discussion about what's the next step, what's the statement, what should the representatives say when they go out to speak to the public so there were a lot of meetings of that sort. And then, the rest of the time was guys getting their hair braided (laughs), you know, that kind of level of social bonding as it were. But, a lot of time studying and a lot of time discussing what the next move would be and writing statements to be read to the public.

DL: So those statements, especially the statements after Courtney Smith's death, stuff like that, how were those statements and those public letters to the Deans… was there kind of a protocol on how to write those?

JD: Hmm. Protocol

DL:Or…

JD: Well, there was a process where the statements were... I don't remember statements ever being written by an individual they were the exception to the rule that you can't write by committee. There was always a discussion of what should the points be, how should they be expressed, what language did we want to use. We were very cognizant of the impact of saying things in one particular way. So I can just see this big coffee table that was in the middle of the office people sitting just around this table and just talking about how to frame the statement, what was non-negotiable and how to frame exactly what it was that we thought would be important as an outcome because we really wanted to have outcomes from this action, more than just an idle statement we really put ourselves on the line so that Swarthmore could be different in the future. Again, many of us were graduating and we were out of here soon so we wanna know things will change for future students when those students were continuing and for students who were coming in the future. So again, it was very collective; we were into African socialism and collectivism and so on at the time so we tried to practice those kinds of values in the ways that we worked together.

DL: Um, let's see… So you had mentioned the general conception of others. Perhaps that SASS had been highly influenced by "outside agitators" - quote unquote - etcetera. And we have heard a few times that that is largely untrue.

JD: Um hm.

DL: Can you share your memories of the director of the Media fellowship house, Robert Woodson, and the decision to work with him during the Parrish Hall direct action?

JD: The only thing that I remember about Mr. Woodson, and it is only recently that I have been able to put a name to this person, is that after President Smith died, there the rumors were swirling that some of the athletes were, particularly, were going to come with baseball bats to physically remove us from the office, that they were so angry that they thought that we were responsible for the President's death, that they were going to remove us and, you know, punish us. And remember now, this is the '60s so the scenes of dogs and fire hoses and all that were not far from our minds that people could in fact, even at Swarthmore, that people could resort to violence. So we were invited to go to Media, to the Fellowship Hall. Now I did not know how that came about and certainly he was not, they were not part of our discussions in terms of drawing up our demands or anything like that. So this was, to my knowledge, this was a reflection of the fact that the community, the larger black community was aware of what was going on at Swarthmore. And sort of monitoring events. Recently, some of us went to Media to try to figure out who were the… the clergy, Was it the clergy who had come to help us? Cause we couldn't remember exactly who the person was. And we went to one of the churches there and asked, we described the person who came from Media to assist us and asked them did they know the history of their particular church and if they thought it was their pastor. And they said something really interesting to me which they did not think it was their pastor, but then, it could have been any one of the black pastors who would have come to Swarthmore to assist us. So this was an older person who would have been active in the church at that time, and her perception was that the black community in Media was well aware of the events at Swarthmore and concerned, and that any one of them, any organization, the leader, the pastor, could have been the person to come to Swarthmore to assist us. To say, "Come to our place to stay here while you're in danger." So I thought that that was really… it was something I didn't know at the time, that the black community was so aware and concerned about what was happening with black students at Swarthmore so that was quite an eye opener for me.

DL: So what were your guy's experiences at the fellowship house?

JD: I remember being there for a couple of days and sleeping on the floor or pews or something. It was very sparse. We were not quite sure what was going to happen at Swarthmore so it was

a stressful time. So I don't recall that we had meetings or anything, our usual way of operating so I don't remember a lot about what happened there except that we felt that we were safely removed from the College in that we had support from outside of the College, this actual, tangible support from outside of the College. That's pretty much what I remember, just leaving and being somewhere else and being safe.

DL: So how did it feel going back to the College? What did the campus climate seem like?

JD: Hmm… One thing that I recall is that although we had been doing a lot of homework that I personally had to go to the same Dean, the Dean of Women, who had interviewed me as an applicant and ask her for an extension. And was like ok, this is the time when we can feel some retribution, because as hard as we tried, if your life is disrupted it's going to be hard to keep up with your work and you may need extra time or some sort of consideration. And so, with some trepidation, I asked for that and it was granted. That's the one thing that I recall about post-takeover, reintegration as it were into College. That I personally did not feel any retribution be… I never saw anybody, any of the athletes who were supposedly going to injure us. I don't recall any of that. And also, I was really on a mission to leave. So I may have been so immersed in my eight courses or however many I was taking, that I would not be the best person to ask what was going on because I was, definitely, was going to graduate.

DL: Ok. So, the first chairman of SASS, Sam Shepard, did he return to campus during the direct action? Is that true?

JD: I don't recall.

DL: So then can you share any memories you have of him?

JD: I remember Sam being very soft spoken, a quiet guy, but with a certain intensity though. He was well respected by all of us. We felt that he understood what was going on at Swarthmore. He had a certain maturity about him. I don't know if he would have been in the front in terms of the takeover though, I don't remember him as being that direct. But again, he was the first person who was willing to be the leader, I mean sometimes it's kind of hard to find the person, or putting it differently, the person who's willing to say "ok I'll be the leader" is not always the person that you want to follow. Sam was, in a way, somewhat of a reluctant leader, he would never have put himself forward and say, "I'm the one." But he was the upperclassmen that we most respected and therefore we pushed him to be the first President of SASS.

DL: Ok. And then Clinton Etheridge, he would say something very similar about himself, saying that he was a reluctant leader and quiet as well. Was that similar?

JD: Um Hm. I would agree and again it was a time where we felt that through the process of organizing, that such reluctant leaders could become real leaders. So he could speak well, he could interact with the administration, he could be that public figure that we felt that we needed to have. And so, he accepted that role.

DL: How did SASS respond to the willingness of outside individuals such as Sam Jordan Jr. from the Franklin and Marshall College and other groups such as the Philadelphia Chapter of the Black Panthers to collaborate with the social justice at Swarthmore?

JD: The Black Panthers that did not happen during my time (laughs). Sam Jordan was not a part of SASS. Sam Jordan was someone that we knew socially and… how to explain his role… at the time many… there were few black students at Swarthmore, the number of women and the number of men were exactly the same, somehow coincidentally. However, that did not necessarily mean that there would be a one-to-one social pairing kind of thing, so, and because we were in touch with other schools, many of the black women who were part of SASS had boyfriends, friends who were at other schools. Sam Jordan was one of those. Now, because, we were active the young men that we were attracted [to] were also people who were active one way or another. If they were American they were activists, if they were African, they were from newly independent countries or they were active in their political movements. So Sam Jordan was not an advisor to SASS or someone who was part of our inner workings, but he was somebody's boyfriend (laughs) and would, from time to time, be part of our discussions. So Sam Jordan did not play a leadership role of any sort in SASS. He had his own things going on (laughs).

DL: Were you involved in the gospel choir or the dance troupe?

JD: The Gospel Choir is also after my time. During the time that I was there, the seeds of the Gospel Choir were sewn in the sense that there was usually a table that many of the black students sat at during meals and we often sang, so there wasn't an organized Gospel Choir in 1969-70. That came a couple of years later. So it was more of an impromptu, almost like the freedom singers you know. We're in this struggle and you're singing. And I don't come from a

church where gospel is sung, but I sang right along with everybody else because it was a way of expressing our solidarity, a way of relating to each other, a way of exalting our culture and it might have also been a little bit of in-your-face as well. So those were the roots of the Gospel Choir. Just students in the dining hall, sitting at a table and after many meals, I don't know if it was after every meal, but after many meals we would sing.

DL: You were, as you said, one of the first few students to graduate with a concentration in Black Studies?

JD: Um Hum.

DL: Can you share your memories of how it might of...how did that education influence your career choices in life?

JD: Is this a setup? Have you seen my resume? I went on to graduate school and ended up getting a doctorate at Columbia. Teaching [and] the last 10 years, also being a Dean of Graduate Studies. During my time as faculty member, I was Chair of the African American Studies department at my school, at the City University of New York. I guess the Swarthmore education: my major was political science, international relations. Black studies for me helped to strengthen the discussion of Africa and the African diaspora. We had international relations but that's not necessarily African, there was one course in African politics. That colored everything, all the other studies that I did. I went on to do economic development and international economics, and then to teach economics and black studies and to chair a black studies department and to advocate for the role of black studies, and we called it African American studies at my school and University [studied at Columbia University and was Dean of Graduate and Professional Studies at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice]. It's kind of a continuous thread in terms of interest and then being in a position to be the kind of faculty member and chairperson and dean who can support students in a way that I didn't feel that the faculty at Swarthmore supported me or other black students at the time. The coursework and the realization that the faculty can make a huge difference but they failed to do so for me at Swarthmore, I think have been important motivating factors throughout my career.

DL: You had told us you were highly focused on your studies after the event that had happened in Parrish. Did you see positive outcomes that have perhaps may have come from the occupation?

JD: Sure. We're sitting here in the Black Cultural House [Swarthmore Black Cultural Center]. That was definitely one of things that we hoped would happen. I understand that it is staffed. It has been staffed. I know there have been some issues from time to time with maintaining the staffing. These many decades later, it's still here. I was in Trotter and I saw the fliers for the Black Studies program and the new faculty, the black faculty and the continuing faculty in Black Studies, I think it's called here. So in terms of the physical structure and the support that the Black House can provide for Black students, I see that. I see that the curriculum in terms of Black Studies that there is a curriculum that has survived and I hope developed. I have not kept up with what's going on in terms of Swarthmore's curriculum as a whole but I do know that in general there has been a lot more discussion about what the canon should be, and efforts to move away from just this strictly Eurocentric approach to education. On the one hand, I see some tangible effects still but I don't know to what extent the legacy of being an organized community has remained. That I don't know. Perhaps, I'll find out.

DL: I guess slightly to go back, did you have prior to being at Swarthmore and doing the direct action, did you have any previous organizing experience?

DL: Not at all. No, not at all.

DL: Alright, is there anything else you would like to add?

JD: No. I think I made my points.

JD: Thank you.

DL: Thank you very much.