Interview with Marilyn Holifield, Swarthmore College Class of 1969. Ms. Holifield was interviewed by students Alis Anasal and Haydn Welch on October 31, 2014. 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 Ms. Holifield were withdrawn to preserve the coherence of the conversation.

Alis Anasal: We'll just introduce ourselves for the recording. My name is Alis Anasal and I am a senior in Professor Dorsey's class this semester.

Haydn Welch: And I'm Haydn Welch and I'm also a senior in the same class. And today we will be interviewing Marilyn Holifield.

Just to begin, I was wondering if you could talk about any activism you participated in before coming to Swarthmore.

Marilyn Holifield: Well, I grew up in Tallahassee, Florida, and in the sixties, when I went to Leon High School, I went there with two other black students and we were the first black students there. And that's when I learned that Tallahassee prided itself in being the only capital of a Confederate state that was not captured by the Union Army. So my family was always very active in civil rights because during that time there was racial segregation enforced by law under the Jim Crow laws as well as traditions in Tallahassee and I was an active participant in that, so I suspect that my activism really started when I was very young and supported the efforts as a young kid of the college students who were protesting against racial segregation by law in Tallahassee. Tallahassee had its own bus boycott, Tallahassee had its own student demonstrations--mostly students from Florida A&M University, and sometimes they were joined by students from Florida State University. So I came from somewhat of an activist family and background.

HW: Could you discuss your decision to come to Swarthmore as a seventeen or an eighteen year old?

MH: Actually, I was sixteen when I graduated from high school, I turned seventeen that summer. One of my older brothers was a student at Franklin and Marshall College, which was near Swarthmore, and he had a friend from the town of Swarthmore. And the way I understand the story is that my brother was always bragging about his younger sister and his friend said "Well if your sister is all what you say she is, why don't you see if she can apply to Swarthmore." My brother didn't tell me this at the time, he just said, "Well, why don't you apply to this college, Swarthmore College, you'll be near me, it's co-ed, it's really highly rated," and later, when I started looking into Swarthmore, learned of its Quaker tradition, and because of the Civil Rights Movement, I was intrigued by the nonviolent traditions and peace activism surrounding the history of Swarthmore, so it was a great, great possibility for me at that time.

HW: So in recalling your first couple of years at Swarthmore, what stands out most to you in your memories?

MH: I met lifelong friends. I met Joyce Frisby, now Joyce Frisby Baynes, and Marilyn Allman, Marilyn Allman Maye, and they became friends for life. We've been in each other's weddings, we've gone to graduations of children, we celebrated our sixtieth birthday in Jamaica together with several others, and so I think the thing that stands out to me most is that Swarthmore brought together people that I connected with and remain connected with from the day I walked on campus until today.

HW: So what activities were you involved with in your first couple of years here?

MH: I was involved in studying, which was a major activity. It's hard to say. I tried out for the swim team, I was one of the few black students that was a swimmer, so I tried out for the swim team... And I always wondered if I had become a member of the swim team whether my experience at Swarthmore would have been any different. But I did not make the swim team so I didn't become a member.[1] I did a lot of reading, separate books to supplement what I was getting in my classes, I remember going through the library I was so amazed, the library had this publication that came out of Africa, *Présence Africaine*.[2] I would read those magazine, I would read a lot about W.E.B. Du Bois I would read a lot about black history but on my own. And, some of the social things, I would go to things at my brother's college at Franklin and Marshall, my other older brother was at Harvard Law School so I would visit him, my grandmother lived in Boston so I would visit my grandmother and my brother in Boston. The social life at Swarthmore was not all that active, so I guess I found other things. Marilyn Allman Maye, I would go to New York with her, I can remember going shopping with her in New York, and going to the Schomburg Library with her in New York, and I met her family. I'm sure I could remember other things, but it was quite uneventful.

HW: How would you describe the racial dynamics on campus when you first entered the college?

MH: I came from the deep South, where there was entrenched racial segregation under the laws and traditions of Jim Crow. However, my mother was from Boston so my family traveled up North to Washington, New York, and Boston in the summers. And I got a glimpse of well, life was different up North. So one of the reasons my two brothers and I always knew that we were going to go to college up North was because we thought it was always worked out up North. And so when we talk about racial dynamics, when I came to Swarthmore as a person who had in effect suffered up close and personal racial hostilities everyday at the white high school, Leon High School -- did you go to Leon?

HW: I didn't, I moved to Maryland before I entered high school, but I know Leon High School.

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[1] Marilyn Holifield also served on the staff of The Halcyon. She was listed as the first year manager of the women's basketball team. She wrote for The Phoenix, and was a member of the Black Studies Curriculum Committee.

[2] Alioune Diop founded *Présence Africaine* which is published in Paris France, in 1947, bringing together a variety of intellectuals and cultural critics to discuss issues from Pan-Africanist perspectives.

MH: Everyday at Leon was a day that I heard the N-word, I don't know how many times, I can't count the number of times. I'm one of those persons... I really don't like the N-word, because it just brings back bad memories. I naively as a seventeen year old thought that everything had been worked out up North, and everything had been worked out at Swarthmore. So it was quite a revelation to find out that things had not been worked out, and even today there are thorny questions on various levels that are unresolved in terms of the "race question." In terms of the dynamics, it wasn't like Leon High School, so everybody was really nice on the surface. I think people came to Swarthmore with the aspiration and expectation that things were great and worked out, and in some sense, coming from my vantage point, they were not Leon High School, so of course they were worked out in that regard.

But in terms of a climate that allowed that allowed you to have that sense of belonging, that environment I think was elusive. And I say that in light of my father's experience. My father went to Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama, and as I grew up, my father would take all of us back to Tuskegee in deepest darkest Alabama, because he was so in love with Tuskegee, he had such a sense of belonging, and that was a sense or a feeling that I believe escaped many of us and I think that's what I was hoping and expecting that my experience at Swarthmore would be similar to my father's experience at Tuskegee where every year he would go back for Founder's day. Every year he would go back for Homecoming, and he would always talk about how important Tuskegee was to him. And so I had that as the backdrop of my expectation for college. So maybe that was a high bar that perhaps was unrealistic.

HW: Could you discuss the founding of SASS, and in your opinion, why was such an organization necessary?

MH: I think SASS (Swarthmore African-American Student Society, or Afro-American Student Society) came together more because of that search for a sense of belonging, perhaps, and that sense of bonding with people who were not challenging you at every level. It created a space where you could just be yourself without having to prove yourself, and that your worth was, by definition, already established, and your value by definition was already established. I think it evolved, but it started from just people coming together around friendship, around, as I said, shopping with Marilyn. But also it was just a safe space, more or less.

HW: Could you discuss some of the dynamics of SASS? Were there ever any tensions about strategies, goals, or leadership? And if so, how did you resolve these tensions?

MH: I don't know if tensions is a good word. I sort of believe in the dialectic, that people come from different backgrounds and they have different views, but in the process of conversation, maybe those views change and you come to another or new equilibrium. I don't recall flat out tensions. I do recall conversations on how to do things, and what to do about things, I don't remember the details. But I don't remember tensions.

HW: What first started your interest in Black Studies as a discipline?

MH: I think I grew up with the notion that somewhere out there, there was a black history and a black culture, and maybe one day I could find it. And coming to Swarthmore as a place of rigorous intellectual inquiry, I think it came together, and bonding with other students in SASS and, I think it was part of the times, that in looking at what we were being offered, that it was important to create an academic acknowledgment of black history, black culture, and validate the fact that we cannot really truly say that you are well educated when a significant portion of the history, culture of important populations is omitted.

HW: Now I'd like to talk about the Black Philosophies of Liberation course. What was the process like for creating a syllabus for such a course?

MH: I don't remember.

HW: Do you remember if you were looking at any other colleges or institutions to create such a syllabus? Like who had the idea to create the Black Philosophies of Liberation Course.

MH: I don't remember. I do know that we had speakers. One was a historian, Playthell Benjamin, he was a very dynamic speaker about black history and African history.[3] I think another speaker was, at that time LeRoi Jones, and he covered some of the arts. I know I did reading, and I think other people did reading that brought them into an understanding of the importance of studying and recognizing black history and culture.

HW: Could you tell us what you remember about being on the Committee of Black Studies. Because this committee would meet in Sharples occasionally, and dealt with President Courtney Smith, so I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about your experience serving on this committee.

MH: I don't remember serving on a committee called Black Studies Committee. I do remember being very active in SASS, maybe I was on a committee. I was speaking to Aundrea Kelley and Myra Rose downstairs, and we were trying to figure out why some of the details of things are so elusive at this point. In some sense, at least for me, I had a very, very intense experience at the white high school down in Tallahassee, and that was really, really intense. Then to come to Swarthmore and have--not the same kind of experience-- the experience, well, it just hadn't been worked out still. I don't know whether I just blocked out all of that. There are many experiences at Leon High School that I don't talk about, don't think about, don't want to talk about. And maybe my Swarthmore experience--I kept pushing forward. In fact in my personality, I just always push forward. I'm always building things, doing things, and trying to, in some sense push things forward.

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[3] Playthell Benjamin is an award-winning journalist and a two-time nominee for the Pulitzer Prize.

HW: Well, anything you remember would be very helpful to us. So I'm wondering if you remember about being in activism in Chester, or in areas outside of Swarthmore, because we were under the impression that you were involved in the Chester CHIP program.

MH: I was involved in the Chester Home Improvement Project with Robert Woodson, and I would go to Chester. I participated in several marches. One was a peace march in New York, and I believe several other students, I believe Marilyn Allman may have been there? I'm not sure. That one stands out because we were marching to the UN and mounted police came and interrupted and attacked the demonstrators and dispersed everyone. And there were buses of students from Swarthmore that participated in that peace march.[4] I remember going on another peace walk, walk for peace, and I think we walked for about several miles, I don't remember. I was active in things that were sponsored by SASS and things that weren't sponsored by SASS at that time.

HW: One Swarthmore alum named Drew Pearson wrote for the Washington Merry Go-Round and he erroneously identified Franklin and Marshall student Sam Jordan as a catalyst for the actions of SASS. Could you talk about your understanding about how outside actors may or may not have been involved in SASS's actions, and the extent to which they influenced black student activism on campus?

MH: I don't remember. I knew Sam. Sam and I were very close at one point. I don't think anyone outside of SASS really influenced our thinking. We may have heard different people speak, different people may have attended meetings. But I believe that the thinking of SASS, the formulation of activities--now remember, SASS stated out in my mind as a group of students creating a safe space where friendships could flourish, and so this whole notion of "Who from the outside would influence the cultivation of a safe space for Swarthmore students to cultivate friendships"--that would be a bit strange. As things evolved, however, the dimension of those friendships spilled over into, "Well maybe it might be a good thing to raise issues with the administration to make life better not only for black students but for the entire college community." Because everyone loses when you are not respecting a certain segment of the community.

HW: I'm wondering how aware SASS members were of other black student protests that were happening at Orangeburg, or San Francisco State, or Northwestern University. And all those happened in 1967, 1968. And so I'm wondering if maybe those protests also had an influence on the events of the 1969 sit-in, for example.

MH: They may have. I mean we watched TV, and read newspapers, so we were aware of what was going on in the country. It was probably part of the context of that time, that provided a backdrop for some of our thinking. My older brother who was at Harvard Law School, was a cofounder of the Harvard Black Law Students Association. So I'm sure if

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[4] Marilyn Allman [Maye] authored an article published in the April 18, 1967 edition of the *Phoenix* discussing the presence of black Swarthmore students at an anti-Vietnam war protest in New York City. Allman addressed police brutality that appeared to target black protesters. See Allman, "Plight of Negro Marchers," *The Phoenix,* April 18, 1967, http://triptych.brynmawr.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection /SC_Phoenix 2/id/16238/show/16236/rec/460

there was anyone who influenced my thinking it might have been my older brother, but that not's outside influence in my mind. And it would have just been an acknowledgment that things were not worked out at Harvard either, which created a necessity for the creation of a black student association, to do essentially the same thing, create opportunities for more black students to be recruited, for black faculty to be recruited. In fact, I don't believe there were any black faculty at Harvard Law School until, while my brother was there, but the year after he graduated, Harvard had its first black faculty member, Derrick Bell.

HW: Could you give us an overview of the events leading up to the 1969 occupation of the admissions office, and also an overview of the events of the sit-in itself?

MH: I just don't remember the details. I think that there might be other people who remember more. Sometimes I say I've just had a very full life since Swarthmore, and I'm also doing things that in some sense could be considered as having made a difference. While the situation at Swarthmore is an important aspect of the history of the college, it's almost a distant memory for me.

HW: Does anything in particular stand out, any random memories, even?

MH: Random memories of--

HW: Of the 1969 sit-in.

MH: Random memories. I really just don't remember. I was thinking that you might have information that I didn't know about that would trigger memories of details, I barely remember--other people have corroborated that I was actually there. Again for me, I think the most important memories that have stayed with me are the memories of the wonderful friendships I'd developed and cultivated that remained with me throughout my life. And those friendships have been friendships, we shared our joys, we shared our disappointments, we shared the developments in our lives. And so I think from my perspective, the personal interactions with my friends for life are the most important memories that I have.

HW: If this doesn't jog your memory, there's no problem and we can just move on to the next section. In our class we've learned that some of the events leading up to the 1969 sit-in was when the Dean of Admissions had published a report on black students on this campus and he gave very personal details about the black students, and even though this report was supposed to be anonymous, because there were so few black students on campus, it was pretty clear which black students the report was discussing. And this report was then just put in McCabe, and anybody on campus had access to it. And that was one of the catalysts to starting this protest movement and starting some SASS demands to President Courtney Smith. And I was wondering if maybe that had sparked any memories of relationships or negotiations with the administration? If not, that's fine.

MH: There are two things that I guess that I remember. And it goes back to, when I came to Swarthmore I had thought that the racial things had been worked out, and it was a place where blacks were really accepted as full human beings and respected totally. And I believe in my freshman year, we learned that our roommates had been asked whether they would like to have a black roommate. We were not asked. I came to Swarthmore with a view that if I were matched with someone to be a roommate, that matching would be done primarily based on similar interests, whether they were a swimmer, they liked to read history, maybe they came from a similar area. I just thought that personal interests or hobbies and common denominators would be the reasons why I would be matched with a roommate. When I and others of us learned that those were not the principal considerations, but the consideration was whether the white student would not mind rooming with a black student. That was offensive. It was a wake-up call that things, even at Swarthmore had not been worked out.

So when our personal information was put on display, there was no rational basis in our minds for our personal information to be put on display. To this day I do not know or understand why there was a necessity to put the personal information of black students on file in the library. And again the personal information of white students was not put on file in the library for access, and I suspect under today's privacy laws it would be illegal to do that. I do think that that underscored the lack of respect of black students. But more than that, it underscored a view that we were not entitled to the same sensitivities as white students. And we were not entitled to the same level of respect and sensitivity. And that was just very offensive.

HW: We've noticed in the course of our class that while many members of SASS were women, most of the leadership positions were held by men. And so I'm wondering you could talk about the role of gender, perhaps, and figuring out who would be leaders of SASS?

MH: Our first president was Sam Shepherd, who was in the class of '68, and I don't remember the details of how it happened. But I believe there was a concerted effort to create a situation where the leadership was male. But the decision making and the activities were not driven necessarily by males, but I think through a consensus.

HW: Why do you think that SASS was so concerned about having men in positions of leadership in SASS if most of the decisions were driven by consensus?

MH: I think it was probably reflective of the times. I think it was more reflective of the sociology at the time.

HW: So how did SASS change in the course of your four years? Do you remember SASS being one particular way when SASS was first formed, and did it seem very different to you when you graduated?

MH: We were still friends. I think for me, SASS was a vehicle for friendship and for bonding and for creating a context where relationships could flourish in a situation where that sense of belonging was extremely elusive at that time.

HW: So how did your understanding of Swarthmore's so-called liberalism change in the course of your four years here? Do you have any thoughts about Swarthmore's Quaker roots or Swarthmore's reputation as being liberal today?

MH: I think that Swarthmore is a great institution and has a great history and tradition I think that what we forget is that even great institutions are part of the history, traditions, and sociology of the times. And so at least from my perspective, it was naive of me to think that Swarthmore would not be reflective in some way of the mainstream culture and history at the time.

HW: Do you have any memories about SASS's coordination with other student groups on campus, perhaps, or other national student organizations?

MH: I have a vague memory that other students were supportive of SASS, at least at the time of the takeover. I don't remember the specifics, but all of us had friends outside of SASS. All of us had acquaintances, classmates, outside of SASS. So it wasn't as if SASS was 100 percent of the experience, it was an important part of the experience but we had friends inside SASS and outside of SASS. And we had experiences inside SASS as well as outside of SASS. While I don't remember the details, I do remember that there was student support.

HW: Following your time at Swarthmore, could you talk about any additional activism you participated in, and if so perhaps how your time at Swarthmore may have influenced this type of activism?

MH: Well that's open-ended. I'll start with a relatively recent event that I can tie directly to my experiences at Swarthmore. During the run-up to the 2012 elections, Florida enacted repressive voter laws, designed to suppress the minority vote in Florida. And I was sitting in my office, thinking that this is outrageous. And so I had a meeting with the Harvard Black Alumni Society of South Florida, and that meeting happened to be at my office. And all of us were disturbed by the onslaught against voting rights. And so I suggested that we have a teach-in was reminiscent of teach-ins during the sixties at Swarthmore. And I knew the president of the historically black university, Florida Memorial University, so I called the president and suggested that we have a teach-in on voting rights and voter suppression. And we had this teach-in that was co-sponsored by Florida Memorial University and the Harvard Black Alumni Society of South Florida at Florida Memorial. Approximately 300 people came. Professor Charles Ogletree from Harvard University came, and he spoke about the suppression of the right to vote generally and historically. There was a professor from Florida Memorial who gave a riveting, historical account of the suppression of the black vote in Florida. The student body president gave a presentation, as well as the supervisor of elections, and we invited

the NAACP to register people to vote and nearly a hundred people were registered to vote. And this was a Saturday morning from 9-12. And it was just amazing that approximately 300 people came, mostly students, about 250 students, who gave up their Saturday to come to a teach-in on voting rights, which probably was a combination of my activist spirit but also my memory of teach-ins at Swarthmore.

HW: Could you talk a little bit about your profession and how that perhaps relates to your activism?

MH: When I graduated from law school, I was an assistant counsel at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in New York, and I litigated civil rights cases in Alabama, Florida, and Georgia. Mostly employment discrimination cases, because the laws against discrimination in the workplace were just becoming implemented. And I also was involved in a major prison reform case against a Georgia state prison in Reidsville, Georgia, which was quite something. And we were able to desegregate the prison facilities. There had never been a black correctional officer in the prison. They had a prison farm where primarily the white officers would beat the black prisoners with axe handles to make them work harder. We got that practice discontinued. Years later I saw the federal judge who was over that case, and I walked up to him and I said, "Hello Judge Alaimo, my name is Marilyn Holifield, do you remember me?" And he said, "Yes I remember you! You were raising hell down in South Georgia!" I think we made a difference. And one of the co-counsel later became a congressman out of Georgia, Sanford Bishop, and he went into politics because he thought the case by case litigation was too slow, and that perhaps as a legislator he could change laws and make a bigger difference.

But I've been involved. I was one of the leaders of a boycott against the tourism industry in Miami-Dade County, because when Nelson Mandela was freed from prison and was visiting Miami, the five mayors of municipalities in Miami-Dade County rescinded their keys to the city, and we viewed that as a snub and decided that because of the lack of economic power, that these elected officials believed that could just disrespect our leaders in any old way. Also, close to that time, there had been a demonstration of Haitian protesters who were protesting bad treatment given by a shop-owner. They were ordered to disassemble and they didn't. And they were just standing there, and so on a count, the police just charged and attacked them brutally. So those two things led to a group of black lawyers being very, very disturbed and we led a three year boycott that resulted in the construction of a world class, a premier ocean front hotel. And it triggered the whole notion of black ownership in the hotel industry that had never been thought of before. And one of the facts that fueled our struggle was when we started--there's something called a banquet roll, that hotels use to employ waiters--and these waiters are called up to serve at banquets. And they make a decent living without a college degree, they can make anywhere from 60,000 to a 100,000 dollars a year. So at the time we started our boycott, there was only one black person on the banquet waiter rolls, and there were very few blacks in management in the hotel industry. But today when we see blacks serving at banquets and working behind the desk, and being in management especially in Miami-Dade county, much of that is attributable to the struggle that we waged. As one of

the demands that we had, we wanted more executives in the hotel industry and so the Convention and Visitors Bureau created a scholarship that has resulted in about 120 blacks, persons of color being awarded scholarships and matriculating at various hospitality schools. So now they're managers of the hotels, managers of hotel departments. There's even a black hotel owners' organization that traces its beginning to the struggle that we waged for inclusion in the economic pie of Miami-Dade county.

HW: Do you have any other information that you'd like to share with us today?

MH: Well, the one thing is that I am really glad that I had the opportunity to obtain an education at Swarthmore. I think that as a country and as a society we will continue to grapple with, as W.E.B. Du Bois called it, the question of the color line and the great divide. As we seek resolution, I think the underpinnings of the education that I received here created a context for me to move forward in my life in ways that have been very, very productive. One thing--when I returned to Florida, there were no black females in major law firms. A lot of my friends said, "Well you're so highly educated, what are you gonna do in Florida?" And I said, I don't know what I'm gonna do, but I'm gonna try and get a job in one of these law firms and be successful. And in today's world people go to these big law firms because they want to make a lot of money. I pursued employment at a major law firm because people said it couldn't be done, and I wanted to say, "Well, I'll give it a good shot and see if it can be done." And so I ultimately was employed by Holland and Knight, and some thirty years later I am still there, and I was the first African-American that was ever employed as a lawyer by Holland and Knight, and I became the first African-American female partner at a major firm in Florida.

None of this was easy. That's why I say my experience at Swarthmore created a wonderful foundation, and it also created an awareness that we may continue for a long, long time searching for answers and searching for solutions to make our society better. And I feel grateful that I had exposure to a certain level of intellectual inquiry that allows me to put pieces together to build things and to do things to try to make our society better.

HW: Thank you so much for being here with us today. I really appreciate your help.

MH: You are quite welcome.