

Nikkita McPherson  
Dartmouth College Oral History Program  
Dartmouth Community and Dartmouth's World  
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WOMICK: Today is Friday, May 3<sup>rd</sup>, right?

McPHERSON: Mhmm. Yeah.

WOMICK: 2013. My name is Cally Womick and I'm here with Nikkita McPherson in Collis. So, to actually get the interview rolling, why don't you talk about where you grew up?

McPHERSON: So, I'm from the Bronx, New York City. Specifically the South Bronx, Jackson Avenue. I lived with my mom and my brother all my life and I [chuckles]— that was where I grew up. I went to school— elementary school I went to Public School 5, which was a block away from my house, so—right on 49<sup>th</sup> and Southern Boulevard. And for middle school and high school I went to Frederick Douglas Academy in Harlem, and, yeah. I spent most of my—that was the rest of my schoolin'.

WOMICK: Yeah, yeah. So, how did you hear about Dartmouth and decide to come here?

McPHERSON: So, I was a part of a program called Summer Search. It takes students who are from low-income backgrounds who have shown potential leadership skills, who have shown perseverance, and altruism and grit up until tenth grade and they go—the requirements are: every week you have to call the mentor, you have two trips that you go on the first summer. You go camping. The second summer you go abroad. And they offer you a college access person, because a lot of the schools they work with the college officer has to deal with 800 students. So, I was lucky enough to be a part of this program, so when I came to applying to colleges my college access person—Elena—she gave me a list of colleges to apply to and most of my lists were out of my reach, based on my SAT scores. But she really believed in me, so I just applied and I—I was very laid back. Like, I applied to wherever. It wasn't a big deal for me.

I kinda had a dream school, Brown, but that was just because I didn't like Harvard. [Both laugh] And so—I've never liked Harvard. [Laughter] So, I just thought Brown was, like, the next best thing.

So, but I realized throughout my senior year that I really didn't care where I ended up. So—terms of Dartmouth, I—five other girls had come to Dartmouth from my high school: Vicki Javier ['10], Shimul [Begum '12], Samantha Azinge ['12], Joan Leslie ['12], and Jalea Moses ['12]. And they—yeah, they were the first five girls, so I was the last person, so far, who's come from my high school. And that might say a lot, I don't know why. [Laughter]

But anyway, I was interested to go to Dartmouth. My high school AP European History teacher, he and his sister had like a quote-unquote “program” where she will take us to visit colleges. And this was her way of like tryin' to make sure we were—the playing field was level. 'Cause a lot of us *couldn't* visit colleges. So as soon as I stepped on Dartmouth's campus I was like, “Oh, like, I guess I should apply here.” It was when the leaves were changing, October. And I just was like, “I have to come here.” And so that's why I applied. I applied because it was beautiful, physically beautiful. And it just felt like a place that I could thrive and struggle and still thrive. And so, that's why I applied to Dartmouth.

That's how I—I didn't know it was Ivy until Dimensions when the snobby kid always asks you like, “How does it feel to be at an Ivy League school? What were your SAT scores?” Like, all those stupid questions. And that's when I found out it was Ivy League, was on my way to Dimensions. Um, which added a lot of...panic. But, I still didn't understand what being Ivy League meant, which is probably why I hated Harvard so much, 'cause it just seemed—it's like, isn't it more about how a person does than the name? But that's just how I thought about it. But, yeah.

WOMICK: Yeah. So wha'd you think of Dimensions?

McPHERSON: I—I actually hung out with people who I—I hung out with those five girls I mentioned. I hung out with them, so I didn't actually deal with Dimensions like that. I went to the show, and I thought it was really stupid. And I didn't like it, at all. But I'm also not a person who likes things like that. I definitely enjoy the theatrical and like arts, I enjoy the arts, but to me that was just such a show. It was like such a show that it was just like—and because my classmates from high school were so honest with me about the realities of Dartmouth and because I was coming to Dartmouth wit' a lot of personal things I was dealing with. Like nothing could—like, it was just annoying. But that's just me being Nikkita. [Laughs]

WOMICK: Yeah. [Laughs] But you decided to come here anyway.

McPHERSON: Yeah.

WOMICK: Even though you knew a lot more about the school, maybe, than a lot of other incoming students?

McPHERSON: Yeah.

WOMICK: Wow. That's a lot.

McPHERSON: [Chuckles]

WOMICK: So, then what was freshman fall like? Orientation and then the rest of the term?

McPHERSON: Um, so...it was...Orientation, so I remember my mom droppin' me off wit' one of my mentors and, like, when she was leaving I started tearing up and she was like, "You're too," like, "You don't need to cry." You know, my mom, she [chuckles] "You're too tough to cry. You don't cry." And I remember Natasha Herring, a '12, walking by, and like, my mom's like, "Look at this nice girl!" Like, "Just say hi to her." Like—[laughs] Natasha gave me her number, like I never texted—I never actually talked to her after that day [both laugh]. Didn't actually talk to her 'til like the end of my freshman year.

But besides that, orientation I tried so hard to be—get—like, I didn't know how not to be myself. Which was hard. It was very difficult. During orientation, my freshman floor—the, by the second—like, I had a huge single, and so I—a lot of Black students, we got together in my single and we were chillin' and talking about where we were from, like, I've never met someone from Michigan and like, there was people from Chicago who I met. And there was just all these people I never met from these different places around the United States, and I'm just like getting to know them. And, growing up where I live, to me, that wasn't a issue, with being around a bunch of other Black people, because we all were so different.

But, um, after they left it was like, say, one or two AM in the morning and it was—this was still during orientation—and one of the floormates said to me if I'm gonna have people in my room so late and be so loud I need to aks permission, and ever since—and then after that, I will play music—like, I like to listen to old school Reggae and Dancehall—and we had our first floor meeting and

same girl said, “People with certain types of music shouldn’t be allowed to, like, play it so loud.” And, like it was hur— it hurt, a lot, because no one on the floor would stand up for me, so I literally only—didn’t speak to anybody.

WOMICK: Yeah.

McPHERSON: I didn’t speak to anyone after that. I just associated with the Black community and ISA—International Student Association—and Students for Africa—that’s what the name at the time, it’s now Dartmouth African Student Association. But, and did World Music Percussion Ensemble. I worked at Home Plate, when it was Home Plate, and just did my classes. And, like, it wasn’t until the seventh week of school that I came around. And it was sad, because that one girl really ru—like, attempted to ruin my first year, freshman fall, and my UGA was not helpful at all in—my UGA wanted me to continue to challenge myself to be a part of the group, and I just didn’t understand how that was okay if I did try and was shut down so many times.

WOMICK: Mhmm.

McPHERSON: And, it was interesting because the guys on the floor—I was closer, way closer, to them throughout the entire term. They actually, like, enjoyed my company and stuff. So, that was my freshman fall. And academically I struggled. Taking Spanish, and just didn’t—couldn’t get it together and all. Was at risk for failing. Was able to pull out a C. I was taking writing, and my first paper I went to RWIT [Student Center for Research, Writing, and Information Technology], did all that stuff. And after I got the paper back my professor aks me if English was my second language. And after that she only let me write papers—and I had to start with the subject of the paper, I couldn’t write how a big, grown up person should—was allow—would be able to write.

WOMICK: Yeah.

McPHERSON: And so I was switched outta her class and put in Writing 2/3. Which was fine, it was just—the experience of being othered and feeling like I wasn’t capable of being at Dartmouth, where you have to write, period, regardless of what major you are, hurt. And so from fre—and, I was coming into fre—I was coming into Dartmouth with my principal from high school telling me I wouldn’t make it past the first term, and telling me, like—telling me that I’m a “ghetto bum”

that, like, it's a sha—like, that shouldn't represent the high school I came from. So the—like, coming into Dartmouth wif, like, those things on my mind, and then it being kind of reinforced, this—like, my floormate, my UGA, and my professor, was difficult. And like struggling with Spanish, and struggling with money and family issues, ec cetera, was trying, but...I quickly escaped whenever I could, for Thanksgiving and winter break, so.

WOMICK: Did you have anyone that you could talk to or lean on during freshman fall?

McPHERSON: I talked to...honestly, I didn't talk to anyone. I tri—I would just scratch the surface. I wouldn't talk. It wasn't something I did, talking to people about things I was going through, 'cause in my mind, throughout my life, people—you have to deal with struggle. Like, that is the reality. And you push through and there's no excuse. There's never—you don't have a excuse. There's no time to be—there's no time to take a breather because you need to power through, and that's something that Summer Search worked with me on and it's only like since junior year of high—of college that I really started to understand what Summer Search meant. Was trying to always help me do, which is reflect and take that moment to breathe. But that's something that it took me from 10<sup>th</sup> grade all the way to junior year of high school—junior year of college to understand the need to talk about what I'm going through and stuff like that sometimes.

WOMICK: Yeah. What about freshman winter?

McPHERSON: [Laughs] Imma be real witchu, Cally. A lot of my freshman year is a blur. I just know that I leaned on ISA and SFA and the AAm [Afro-American Society]. And I worked. And, I just—I leaned on the communities that I, you know—World Music Percussion Ensemble kept me sane. But freshman year is a blur 'cause it hurt so much. So, I—yeah, that's how—I lean—and I leaned on my coworkers, the full-time workers, in Home Plate and FoCo.

WOMICK: And those were non-Dartmouth students, right?

McPHERSON: Yeah. Non-Dartmouth students. And so it was—it was the affinity groups I leaned on, and World Music Percussion, and like my coworkers. And I called home a lot. But my mom just didn't—it's hard for any parent to know what to say when—it's just so complicated. So...

- WOMICK: Yeah. Was she supportive of you being here and staying here?
- McPHERSON: She was suppor—like, there was a point, moment where she said I—if I want to leave I should just leave, because that’s how bad it was. But I also have a ego, which a lot of people may know, and [chuckles] I didn’t wanna leave. And I felt like I had no other option. I didn’t—as a Black woman from the stereotypical, unfortunately, single-parent home, immigrant home...what other option would I have? Like, to go back home and like find a job? Where in New York City? Like, where I’m gonna find a job during the recession as a 18-year-old without a degree? Like, what are you actually gonna do? So, that was not really [chuckles] an option.
- WOMICK: Yeah. So, then your freshman year ended with you not really liking this place.
- McPHERSON: No. I finished a final—I purp— I didn’t finish a final just so I could catch the bus to leave.
- WOMICK: Just didn’t finish it?
- McPHERSON: I like—like, I fini—like, I could’ve done more, but I was like, “I don’t care,” and like left. So. [Laughs]
- WOMICK: What made you come back?
- McPHERSON: [Chuckles] Bein’, just bein’—like, havin’ a ego. And like, “Well, I took a three month break at summer and so it’s time to start over. It’s time to try somethin’ new and fight.”
- WOMICK: Did you go home for the summer?
- McPHERSON: Mhmm. I did a internship wif the District Attorney’s Office in the Bronx, which showed me that I want nothing to do with the judicial system in America, and—yeah. And that’s what I did. And I volunteered at Summer Search as well. And just babysat, so. Didn’t think about Dartmouth at all. Didn’t hang out with Dartmouth people. It was weird for—I was like, why do I need to hang out wit’ y’all if I’m gonna be wit’ y’all for the rest of the four years? I was very tri—I was very trife. I was very—that’s just how like, yeah. [Laughs]
- WOMICK: And so then you came back for sophomore year. What was that like?

McPHERSON: Again a blur. I—sophomore fall was my best grades. I worked almost 15 to 20 hours a week, did For Your Glory—which is a praise, dance group—did World Music Percussion, and did my classes. And just beasted and got a three point, like, five or something that term.

WOMICK: Nice!

McPHERSON: And—but was lonely. Very lonely. And then—yeah. That was fall. Fall was just me doin' me. Like, doin', "Why you came to Dartmouth?" "Academics." "Alright, go grind it out." And just—but I felt lonely, and alone, not fulfilled because I was bein' selfish and that's not something I'm used to doing.

WOMICK: Mhmm. And were you on in the winter, then?

McPHERSON: I was, yeah. I was on all sophomore year. So, in the winter I—loneliness started picking up and I didn't do well, as well, and actually got a C in one of my classes that I actually liked and tried to work hard in.

WOMICK: That musta been hard.

McPHERSON: Yeah. And so when—the ending of my sophomore winter, one of my classmates from high school was killed. I found out during finals. Around that time, one of my mentors had a heart attack, from my high school. And then one of my mentees committed suicide in college the first week when I got back to Dartmouth in the spring. So, yeah. That was my sophomore year. And so, spring term—spring term was me tryin' to just keep it together.

WOMICK: Yeah.

McPHERSON: [Chuckles] And be strong. And push everything out of my mind. I tried the counseling thing, but it's easy to go to counseling and just let them talk to you or you just say things that you think they want to hear, which is what I did. And, yeah. And then sophomore summer I—it was much needed, I would say. I—throughout this time, like, I definitely had friends, like I definitely—there were people who...do you get to name people, or is that—?

WOMICK: Yeah, you can.

McPHERSON: People like my friend Lancel [Joseph '13], who's like my brother. Like, my ride or die here. And there's like my homeboy RJ. And then there was like a lotta other people who would just wait in the back. *Wait*, wait for me. There was a lotta people, like too many to name, who would just wait for me. There were a lotta upperclassmen, like this young lady named Kathryn Miller ['10]. Catianne [Ngante '11] and many other upperclassmen. Natasha Herring I finally came around to, after. [Chuckles] Who just *waited*. They waited for me, because I was just so egotistical and I think I was powerful and didn't need support, didn't need to change, didn't need to grow—even though I was growing, even though I was changing, even though I was grappling with things.

So, this—around this time I'm like dealing with the things I didn't deal with freshman year, such as like my father being deported and like, you know, him—you know, him not—you know, just the—if you could think about the stereotypical father-daughter relationship that is put on T.V. or like perpetuated in society, like that's what I experienced. And, you know, I remember writing a letter to him freshman year, like telling him how much he hurt me, and him dismissing all of that and that was just hard. And so sophomore year—so it's just very com—my relationship, and how I have relationships with people, is very complicated.

I also took a lotta risks, because during high school I didn't—during, before Dartmouth, I didn't have friends. Like, this concept of friendship was weird. So I thought if you put yourself out there, people would be nice to you and like wanna be your friend if you show that you generally are just tryna be a nice person, and so I was—I paid the consequences for that, for being too trustworthy an'—so, I tell all that to say that so when sophomore year rolled around I decided to take a risk and like be on the AAm exec board for sophomore summer and like try to get—try to let people in.

And so I, you know, just—sophomore summer—for a person like me, who like went through a hard time at Dartmouth, like, sophomore summer, I will recommend it for anyone to do sophomore summer, because I got to meet and get to know people I wouldn't have gotten to know otherwise. I got to do—I got to contemplate doing [chuckles] things that I wouldn't have done otherwise. And I got to see what it was like to have time on my hands to do what I enjoyed, and I enjoyed buildin' up the Black community. I enjoyed buildin' coalition across campus. My friends—

since we had a party with Tabard. And that was just what I enjoyed. And I realized that I can't separate myself from that.

And I realized that my desire throughout this time to be seen as Jamaican and not Black was self-hate and unproductive. So, during sophomore summer, that's when a lot of—that's when I started shifting and...growing up, to a certain extent. Maturing. Because I started finding my passion. My passion is community uplift for Black and Latino people. And anyone, for that matter, but because that's what I know, that's what I grew up around, that's who I most readily can understand our issues—even though our issues span across a lotta differences, across—outside of the Black and Latino community.

I've realized—sophomore summer, like a lot of things. Was when I started realizing what I needed and wanted from this world, and what I can give. *How* was the next step that I took, junior year, where junior fall I did SEAD [Summer Enrichment at Dartmouth], I interned in Schenectady. And that's when I rea—that's when I knew I wanted—like, I always wanted to work with youth. I knew I wanted to work with youth. I didn't know what capacity, so I contemplated guidance counseling. So, that's what, kinda, SEAD is. Like a guidance counselor. But I, you know, I realized the flaws with SEAD itself. I realized the flaws—so many flaws—with the board of education system. So many, just, systems that have to be resisted, but it's so hard to resist because you can fall so easily into the trap of being the savior, and that's not good, either. So, yeah.

And I got to know the family that owned Price Chopper. And—beautiful family, lovely people who—if they had met—if I had done SEAD my sophomore year I would probably have scared them away. I will have probably alienated them because of my bitterness towards people who were different from me. White people, specifically. So, that was just out of pain. That hate was coming out of pain. So, like sophomore sum—no, junior fall, I did SEAD.

Then junior winter I went away to University of California at San Diego. And this was the first time where academics wasn't a big deal. I was like, "Oh. This what it's like to, like, not go to Dartmouth." [Both laugh] Not to say that—like, for once, I could enjoy the material and like *learn* the material versus, I feel like, here you learn it after you've done with the class. [Both laugh] So, [chuckles] you have time to process after you're done with the class, whereas at UCSD you had time to process while there, so.

I was—I became a part of the Black Student Union at UCSD and it just blew my mind how two per— they were 2% of the population, 40 active members, approximately—but yet they were so *powerful*, on a campus that was like 30,000—a lot of people. But yet they were so powerful. And I was like, “Why—like, how do I take this back to Dartmouth? How do I get people across races, across socioeconomic classes, across identities in general, to be so strong like they were able to? Be catalysts for coalition at their school with being only 2% of the population.”

And, you know, I went to the African Black Coalition, which is like their retreat that they have where all the UCs get together at a certain school and like have speakers and stuff. So, we went to Berkeley and got to see Farakhan speak, hear him speak, and do all these workshops. And I just was like, “What is it about like Dartmouth, what is it about the Northeast that this is not happening? This coalition, this resistance, this consciousness? Intense consciousness about the world, like, why is it not *here*?” And I was—I just—when I came back to Dartmouth, I was on this mission. I was like, “I am gonna find a way, somehow I’m gonna make somebody mad somehow to get a damn coalition going. To get people to start getting together. To just build community and get people to be angry, and get people to not to always wanna argue. Like, to get people to be passionate and do something.”

During winter term, junior winter, my aunt—my aunt passed away. And my uncle passed away a week later. So—

WOMICK: Wow.

McPHERSON: So [chuckles] I came back to Dartmouth just like, “You know what? I have everything to live for and nothing to lose.” And so—I was up in the air about running for AAm president. I was like, “I don’t know what to offer this community. I don’t—I—my politics are more radical than the community wants and I don’t even think they’re that radical. My approach to people is very...assertive, and just, like, intense. My presence is very demanding and can—fits a lot of Black female stereotypes, like what—I just—,” lotta things were going, like “What can I actually offer?”

So I went to talk to two different professors. Professor [Russell] Rickford was one. And I’m tellin’ him I don’t wanna do it, I think that somebody else could do it, like, I’m not about that. Like, I could do

what I need to do somehow, somehow, somewhere else. And just—I just remember runnin’ my mouth. He just goes, like, “Nikkita, why you bein’ so triflin’?” [Chuckles] And I’m just like, “You know what? Maybe you’re right.”

Then I went to pro—[chuckles] to Professor [Reena] Goldthree and I was, you know, running my mouth again and she’s like, “Nikkita, do you think you have a choice?” Like, “Do you—,” like, “What—.” She ran off my resume of things I’ve already done with the AAm and I’ve already done with the Dartmouth community at large and she’s like, “Do you think,” like, “Why are you makin’ it seem like this is not something that you are supposed to do?” And I—she didn’t say it from a place like, “You’re the only person for the job.” She said it from a place of, “Acknowledge what you’ve done and give yourself this moment to celebrate that.”

And so, when you’re not on all for two terms, you know, the freshmen think that they run the show. So, the fresh-[chuckles]—it was—I ran uncontested, so it didn’t matter, to a certain extent, if the freshmen cared about me or not, but it was important to me that they at least were willing to talk to me. So as soon as I got back and as soon as I decide I was gonna be running for AAm president, I let them know who I was off the bat. You know, I will walk into Cutter-Shabazz, it’s eight o’clock at night and say, “Good morning!” and interrupt their studyin’ and tell them things like, “Why you ignoring me?” even though it was clear they were studyin’. I would do things to—I would throw my—I threw my personality at them all at once so that they wouldn’t be shocked [both laugh] throughout the rest of the term—the year, and like this year.

And, I remember when I—you had to—we had to present ourselves to the community, even though you’re uncontested. I remember giving my presentation and I remember just, like, a sigh of relief for some people and a sigh of concern for some people [chuckles] and just, you know, always varying opinions. I just remember telling people, like, “I want to build this community.”

And, so, then—and rest of junior spring was me tryna like just get through my classes. I spent a lotta time with some of my senior friends ‘cause I just was like, “I gotta spend as much time with them as possible.” And yeah.

And so going back to junior winter, I applied to be a teacher at Breakthrough Collaborative, *after* spending two hours on the phone

with the director telling him why I don't think I should be applying to be a teacher and him telling me that I should take the risk. And, so, finally applied, or whatever, and I got in. Manchester. Breakthrough Manchester. So during junior summer I was at Breakthrough Manchester, New Hampshire. And after about two, three weeks I realized I enjoy teaching. I enjoy the control of teaching [both chuckle], I enjoy the ownership, I enjoy being able to know that I might not be able to change the hearts of every student, but I can just be that moment in their life. And why not take that moment?

And so, loved it. I dealt with a lot of challenges with my coworkers in terms of, you know, me being Nikkita and them—a lot of them—not having been used to someone like me. And I dealt with that in a way where, ultimately, it was about the students and I could give a shit about whether or not my colleagues liked my approach or felt like they were comfortable enough to talk to me, because at the end of the day, that's not my issue. Because if you're—the problem is not whether or not you're comfortable to talk to me as a—the problem is if you're comfortable with yourself enough to talk to me. And if I put myself out there and talk to you and you still don't feel like you can talk to me, that's not my—that's just not my issue. [Chuckles] So, that's something I've dealt with.

I remember my wrap-up interview—we have like a exit interview—and out of all the things, in terms of improvement that I could've done, the director decides—this was not the director that convinced me to come, this is the new director—decides to tell me that I need to—in summary, he was just like, you know, “You need to work on like your—how you engage with your—with people, because some people felt like you didn't make them comfortable enough to come to you.” Like—basically, he came at my personality. Like, he straight up came at my personality, makin' it seem like I was just this unapproachable, mean person.

And, I remember being pissed off. And I like talked to the counselor on-site about it and I talked to the old director about it. And I talked to some of my instructional coaches who are teachers about it. And they were like, “You should talk to him.” So I told him, I was like, “Listen. You could have given me any other advice. What made you think tellin' me about my—me needing to change my personality was okay? That—the problem with my colleagues not wanting—not feeling comfortable to talk to me, to make that *my* issue is disrespectful.” Like, so I had to break it down for him. And that was the first official time that I had to challenge someone's privilege.

Like, that was the first time I can—that I can say I challenged it in a way that was productive. ‘Cause other times I was just—I told people they’re stupid. [Chuckles] But language is everything. And I realized I don’t like to alienate people. So, yeah. So that was my junior summer.

And now I’m—went through senior year. I feel like I don’t need to be talkin’ ‘bout it, but I don’t know whatchu wanna know about senior year, really. [Laughs]

WOMICK: Whatever you wanna talk about.

McPHERSON: The Afro-American Society *was* my senior year. That was my—I had no choice, the—I’m president. I—the first term was hard. It was hard because we were starting from scr—we were starting with scraps. Like, the organization had not been revitalized in so long, and that was one of my goals that I outlined in the spring, so it wasn’t like a shock to anyone that that’s what I wanted to do. And we weren’t transitioned into our positions and it was just like—it was like we were walking through molasses trying to just get the organization—revitalize it as we tried to get it off the ground so we can have programming.

So, the one thing we made sure to do was academics, set that tone. And in the meantime, we spent maybe \$500 that term, because we were just so foc—I wanted us to be focused on building the organization so we can build the community. And we got a lot of backlash, you know, people complainin’ that we didn’t have enough, you know, social events. People complainin’ about every thing possible. And I didn’t—I took all the blame, ‘cause I am the president and, honestly, I don’t care. You know, people can complain all day. But the end goal is to make sure, from now on, no one is handed a shitty organization.

And this need for a good organization was just years and years and years of there not being time, or like people not having the support to take the risks to revitalize, but because there was a new—we were just in a perfect position ‘cause it was a new advisor, new OPAL director, just there was a lot of changes at Dartmouth this past fall that allowed for us to be able to do that. So yeah, that was the focus. The theme for this year was building community, and like academic thriving, not surviving. And so we still, you know—like, still, it’s probably going to be a theme for the rest of the time that we exist here, so.

You always can be building community. And, always, academic excellence, achieving academic excellence. And, so yeah, so that was what it—it just was us tryin' to build the organization, build our team of people, like, you know, we have to get to know each other, trust each other, like, be willin' to take risks with each other. Like, it was just so much that we had to do to make sure we trusted each other enough to work as the team, which is important, so. I remember fall term, after every meeting, I will do a cheer I learned, like a peanut butter cheer, and things I learned during the summer with middle—with the middle school kids I work with, and they...at first they *hated* it. They were like, "Oh my god, Nikkita..." [Laughter] But after a while, like even to this day they ask me, like when am I gonna do another cheer. And I—yeah, that was—so then winter. AAm winter rolled around.

During—when we ended fall, I required that everyone start thinking about events for winter and like submit forms for winter and first Sunday back we're doing budget meeting and we're gonna put these events on. You know, still hard, right. Still hard to get people rolling. And so we're gettin' people rolling, we're tryna get everybody rollin', rollin' and rollin', and—during the break, actually—during the break I actually planned, like outlined, what else needed to be done for the rest of the term, such as revising the constitution, events, how we wanted to end the year, the election process. You know, always thinkin' ahead.

So, when it came winter term, we're still like molasses, but we had more events and we started gettin'—you know, implementin' the social aspect that the AAm supports, the cultural aspect the AAm supports. 'Cause we support four organizations: Dartmouth Alliance for Children of Color, BUDA (Black Underground Theater Association), UJIMA (our dance group), and Black Praxis (our literary magazine). So those are the organizations we support and they've been working really hard this entire year. And the different positions been working really hard this entire year to try and make sustainable things that, like—less is more mentality. I reiterate it all the time, like, quality over quantity. Quality over quantity. So, yes.

So, winter term we're still—we're movin' a little faster but I don't even think we still picked up just yet. I think next year it will be lovely to see where the next board takes it. But this year was literally, like, revitalization and like getting it together [chuckles] and just layin' the groundwork so that people won't have to deal wif, you

know, tryin' to change the AAm when it's a lot of work and it takes away from doing things for the community.

So, one thing I would say about winter term, which I know prob'ly you wanna hear, is just writing my speech for MLK. So I started writing it during winter break, and I remember writing four sentences and like not looking at it again. [Laughter] And then I just remember—you know, I came back for winter term. One day I sat down and I just started writing, just started writing. Because during this time from when I got elected in spring, I—from when I got elected in spring, I started trying to take the pulse of the campus in terms of things I didn't know was going on. So I started learning about sexual assault, started learning about homophobia, started learning about just discrimination across, inequality across. Just started taking the pulse of campus and understanding what are issues that I don't know exist.

And so, I finally—I guess that day when I started writing, I finally—it finally hit me what it was that I needed to write about. And that's where—there's—I thought it would, you know—I don't believe coincidence. I thought it was just the art of nonconformity. And the fact that I learned about all these things that happen at Dartmouth and I'm like, "We have conformed. We have allowed for the status quo to continue. And we haven't gotten angry about it. We have settled. We have allo—we as a community have allowed these things to happen and turned a blind eye to it, but then at the same time want to exalt ourselves as this great community. But we're not."

So that was—that's where I wrote from. I wrote from the pulse that I took of my community, of the Dartmouth community and the Dartmouth communit<sup>i</sup>es, the various communit<sup>i</sup>es that make up this campus. And I—that's where I wrote from. Not to say I wrote from peoples' perspective, I didn't. That's not to say any of that. It was more the pulse that was taken and the reality of oppression and violence that exists and how the system of white supremacy really is prevalent on this campus. Prevalent in this nation. Prevalent in this world. And how *we* have contributed to it bein' prevalent here, in this nation, and in this world. People might not even *realize*—and I didn't even touch on that in my speech—how we have allowed certain things happening in this nation and in this world, some of it does hap—is funded by Dartmouth, to a certain extent. And to a lot of an extent. I started learning about environmental justice and

sustainability. I started learning about the pulses of Dartmouth. So, that's how I started thinking about my speech.

And I decided—you know, I took Social Justice Rhetoric [Speech 31] in the winter, purposefully, because I wanted to have a speech that would not alienate but would challenge. And I wanted to learn about language and how to speak and how to—how language can allow people who don't want to buy in. So that's why I took that class with Professor Anguiano. And she helped me a lot with my speech. Alysson Satterlund helped me a lot. [T. M.] Mosley. Various—a lot of people, I can't even remember all their names, helped me with my speech. My friends helped me with the grammar [laughs] and that stuff.

And I just remember, when I was elected in the—last spring, my friend Shan, Crishuana Williams, Shan Williams '12—I said to her, I said, “Shan, you know, I don't think people—,” ‘cause I didn't know I had to give this speech when I was running for AAm president [chuckles], because I never went to MLK events ‘cause I didn't support the idea that we only celebrate him on this week and we actually aren't actually—we shou—we don't deserve to celebrate him. That's how I felt throughout my entire time at Dartmouth. So this—be—this, that was my first time bein' at a MLK event! And I remember tellin' Shan, like, “People messed up lettin' me be the one that's gonna speak. They—I don't think people understand what they have done and what I'm gonna use that moment for.” I didn't know what I was gonna use it for, but I knew I wasn't going to just let it be a forgettable moment.

So when I got to meet Katori Hall I remember wanting to practice my speech and not being able to. Remember my friend Benny tellin' me like, I have one shot to make this right, to do it right, and so...I just remember, during my speech, I just—I spoke from a place I hadn't spoken from in a long time. I spoke from a raw, uncensored tone that I haven't used in a long time. Dartmouth tends to take that away. And I spoke so that it—I knew—I spoke in a way where I hope that the communities that I represented and the communities that I was a ally to knew that I was here for them, and that I wouldn't back down because the Board o' Trustees were in the audience. I wouldn't back down because President Folt or any person with money, or any person who “runs the show,” quote-unquote, was in the audience.

And I delivered my speech. And then to hear Katori Hall speak—the fact that three women spoke at MLK day—like, I don't think a lot of people really realize what that meant. And, so now in senior spring, as you know [chuckles]—I remember telling someone that, “I feel like this term will be the term where people will get mad.” I remember telling some people that. “I think,” I said, “I think, I think this is it.”

So when we had the Dickey—Joe Ramsawak ['14] reached out to me and various other people, such as Stella [Safari '13] and Ashley Afranie[-Sakyi '13], and Nastassja Schmiedt—or Nasty, as she likes to go by, Nasty, yeah. He was like, “We need to talk back to Dickey. We need to make Dickey understand why their e-mail was inappropriate.” And we did. And it was the most...this never happened before, in my time at Dartmouth. I don't remember this ever happening, where a group of people—seniors—had administrators in the room, didn't let them speak, and spoke so raw and uncensored. And I was—that made my day.

Then on top of that, I asks people who want to be a part of further movements, and then before you knew it, people got together. People I didn't know. That's where the coalition formed, then. That's when the need for a leader wasn't needed because there was so many people invested and had their own styles, and that's where Dartmouth got to experience a coalition, and power, and resistance in a way that they probably have never—have not experienced it for a long time. We had things that have happened over the years, but I think we—this contemporary movement, people forgot that people still are activists. That people still are protestors. And people still will rattle your feathers and shake you up and make earthquakes just erupt, you know. Just go off. And that's what happened. And that's—and I fully support what happened. And I fully support the need to resist at all times.

And so, in my speech, when I said a storm was brewing, when I said what role you will play, those were not words to be taken lightly. Because you could do but so much to people before they will resist you, and resist you in a way that you cannot back away from. You cannot ignore. And those ignorant people fell right into their trap and exposed the horrors of Dartmouth. Things that people wouldn't talk about. And, you know...the school takin' a big step, cancellin' classes. President Folt, Dean Johnson, takin' a big step and saying, “This is not about protestors. This is about the issues at Dartmouth.” Unfortunately, Steve Mandel didn't get the memo, but

you know, maybe we could talk over coffee, and I could understand what made him think he can equate someone bein' threatened with rape with, um, "interrupting a show." But that's besides the point.

But, you know, it's time now. And it's something that I stand by. It's time to collaborate, hold each other accountable, and move forward *together*. Move forward *together*. And so when there are, you know, underclassmen reachin' out to me, White, Black, Latino, Asian—all, everybody, saying, "Oh, Nikkita," like, "What can I do?" "Nikkita, what is privilege?" "What is race?" Like, "I'm a *white kid*. Like, I don't get it." And for me to know and to have been in a place where before I would have been mad at them for coming to me, but for me to be so happy that they're willing to be vulnerable and say "I don't understand." And for them to wanna know what role they can play.

And I will say and I will say it again, you find your passion. And if you find your passion you will drive your interests. And if your interests and your passion is playing guitar, that is your interest and your passion, your contribution to society—because that is what we want. We need passionate people. Because if you're passionate about something, that is positive contribution. So, I don't believe in one solution. I don't believe in one person has to solve everything. I don't believe any of those things. I believe in bringin' everyone into the conversation, in bringin' everyone a part of it, everyone who has a stake to have a voice.

And today, I guess you're lucky, or someone's lucky, I don't know—I was able to meet with GLC and IFC, that is the Greek Leadership—sorry, I forget—Greek Leadership Council, Panhel, Intra-Fraternity Council—something like that, and other presidents and vice-presidents and members of Greeks. I was able to speak with them about how they wanna move forward. And they were able to speak candidly about—just, "We acknowledge there's an issue. We acknowledge how the Greek system may have played a role in a lot of these issues, and we wanna know what we can *do* within our organizations to push this forward."

And just going through this meeting and people literally just—just, I'm like, "Alright, let's get suggestions. Let's get suggestions. Wha'd'you suggest? What are you thinking? What are you thinking? What are you thinking?" And not dismissing anyone's point. And having men in the room, women in the room, who really just want change. Who really are—in this place where, "Okay, now what?" And needin' guidance. And for them to—for me to be able to say,

“Don’t turn to me for guidance; turn to all of us for guidance.” For me to have that moment to let them know—especially some of them bein’ ‘14s—and saying, “It’s about *everyone*. No one person has the right answer because there’s no one solution to this. It’s just a complex problem needs to be solved by complex solutions.” [Chuckles]

And then I—and then at the end of the meeting the fraternity guys came to me and said, “Nikkita, what is an action item we can do?” And I said, I told them, I said, “You need to acknowledge where your organizations have come short and acknowledge where you need to go.” And to not have to argument with them about why that’s important, because from Di—from last week, with the campus dialogue and people realize, “Wait, these are issues we need to—why are we attacking our peers? These are issues we need to deal with.”

So, for me to be ending my senior year wif the ability to know that I was able to talk to someone about finding their passion. And I was able to talk to someone else about knowing that this is a team effort. And I was able to talk to someone—is what I came—last junior spring—what my goal was, building community. And today, it finally came full circle [chokes up] that, um, it just takes a little patience. A little resistance, a little stirring up of the pot. A little passion. And a willingness to tear some shit down so that we can build up together.

And the fact it came full circle today is very interesting because it’s...it was a beautiful day [chuckles] and it’s sunny outside and beautiful. And there’s this game called harbor that they coulda been playing and—it—today like—that’s not to say there aren’t trife-ass people on this campus [chuckles] or in this world, but that’s to say that you meet people where they are and they can do—they can shock you. And you can shock yourself.

And the fact that people are like, “Well,” like, “Where is OPAL?” Like, “I would like to go to OPAL.” Like, this is change that has been happening over the past four years, believe it or not. These are things that’ve been happening. And slowly happening, and slowly happening. And what the RealTalk group did was say, “You know what? We’re tired of you hidin’ this. We’re tired of you not listenin’ to us. We’re tired of bein’ hurt. We’re tired of bein’ in pain. We’re tired of seein’ our friends hurt,” like, “Get it together, Dartmouth. Get it together.” And we needed to hear that. And we needed to see that.

And we needed to see what was underneath the evergreens at Dartmouth, and so now we can move forward.

So, yeah. To, you know—my senior year is wrapping up in a way where I'm very hopeful that I can send my kids here, if they wanted to come here. I'm very hopeful that another young lady won't be raped. I'm very hopeful that another person won't be called the n-word and someone get away with it. I'm very hopeful for these things.

Is it gonna come in the next three months? I doubt it. But the fact you got people talking who never used to be a part of this conversation is beautiful. And, you know, that doesn't mean I've settled. I always set high expectations, you know, we need to get this shit together quickly. But, um [chuckles]—gotta be realistic in our goals. So, yeah.

I don't know if you have any other questions, or...

WOMICK: I guess, looking forward past graduation, what do you see your continued involvement with the college looking like?

McPHERSON: Um—I don't know. [Chuckles] I think it will be—at first I think it will be a lot of interpersonal things. I don't see myself being actively a part of alumni councils and all that shit. I don't. I think it will be very interpersonal and very, you know, peo—my peers contacting me and saying, "Oh, we have this thing about this," like, "Can you help me think through this?" Or things like that, which is what some upp—some alumni did for me throughout this year. And I think that's the role I might play for a few years, before I find my niche to how I wanna be actively involved as an alum.

WOMICK: Mhmm. So, with four years under your belt, little bit of perspective, who would you say is a part of the Dartmouth community and, I guess, before that even, do you think there is such a thing as a cohesive Dartmouth community? And, if so, who gets included in that and who maybe gets left out?

McPHERSON: I think we need to start saying Dartmouth communit/ies because it's always problematic when you make something singular because you dismiss the very dynamic, complex realities that are here that make up communities. Where you see a bunch of Black students and you think they all got the same experience when they don't. You see a bunch of White students, you think they all got the same

experience, but they don't. Asian, Latina—I could go down the list. And so I think we need to just change it to Dartmouth communities and stop playin' like, you know—because callin' it Dartmouth community excludes people. It tends to exclude the people who have been historically marginalized. And it tends to not acknowledge how we need to support everyone we decide to bring to Dartmouth. So, I just think it needs to be a plural term.

WOMICK: Yeah. Good answer.

McPHERSON: [Chuckles]

WOMICK: So, you've touched on this a lot, but I just wanted to ask explicitly: how do you think your time at Dartmouth has changed you as a person?

McPHERSON: First of all, Dartmouth has been memorable. It's changed me—I've learned how to adapt. And I've learned how to find my passion. And I've learned language—I learned the importance of language, in how you speak and how you can easily invite people in and push people out with just one word. And I learned—and I've changed—because I've become patient and I've learned how to reflect. And I think Dartmouth needs to make that a class or something, because it changes everything when you take those ten to twenty minutes to just reflect and be selfish and do as you want and think about what you want and express yourself in how you want and just take that moment to yourself to think about your day, to think about your week. To journal. To play whatever instrument. To go climb a rock. Like, whatever it is that you do to reflect and ease your mind. I think Dartmouth has taught me the need to do that because of all of the things that I've had to deal with. So.

WOMICK: Is there anything we haven't talked about yet or that I haven't asked you that you wish I had or that you'd like to talk about?

McPHERSON: No, not really. [Chuckles] Not that I can think.

WOMICK: Ok. I'll turn these off, then.

**[End of Interview]**