

David Bonga '74
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
Dartmouth Community and Dartmouth's World
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DONIN: Today is Monday, February 4th, 2012. My name is Mary Donin. We are here in Rauner Library with David Bonga, Dartmouth Class of 1974.

Okay, David, we like to start out finding out from our narrators how it is they ended up coming to Dartmouth: where you grew up, how you found out about Dartmouth, whether there was a particular mentor in high school or whoever it was who told you about Dartmouth, how you ended up here.

BONGA: Okay. Well, I'm Minnesota Chippewa, enrolled at White Earth. My mom is from Red Lake; my dad was from White Earth. In the late '40s, my dad, who is a logger, decided to move to Washington. They got invited to go to Washington to work for a friend's father who had moved out to Washington and started a lumber company. And so my dad, who used to work for him, decided that he would go, provided that (Madode) his best friend's family would go also, St. Clairs. And so the St. Clairs and the Bongas moved out to Monroe, Washington, back in about 1949, I think it was. They lived, oh, probably four miles apart or so.

And then eventually his (Madode's) sister and her family moved out from Minnesota, and then Madode's brother also moved out, so we had this small community of Chippewa people in Monroe, Washington. And Monroe was a pretty non-native town. The only Indian families that I ever knew were our neighbors, who all came from Minnesota.

It turned out eventually, I guess after I graduated from high school in 1970 and after I graduated from Dartmouth, going back to some high school class reunions, I found out that there was probably three other Native families that I had grown up with that I didn't know were Native. But back in those days, you know, you didn't really say you were Native.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

BONGA: You know, I was kind of surprised about that. And so living in Monroe, I have four older brothers and a little sister, a younger sister. The brothers. Three out of the four had joined the service, and they had—Rich had done the Air Force, brother Abe did the Army, and then Joe also did the Army. Joe is the one that's closest to me.

And so, you know, nobody had ever gone to college. My dad never finished high school, never finished grade school, matter of fact. Got tuberculosis at a boarding school they sent him to in Wisconsin, and he quit school then and walked home. And my mom had grown up on the Red Lake Reservation and had gone to—she always called it the Sisters School. All the nuns. I don't believe—I don't think she finished high school, either. And so nobody ever had any college experience at all.

So then my brothers all joined the service, and as they came home at varying times, they went to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs would send them on a relocation program, where they would take Native people from their homes, send them to a big city to get trained in some specialty, and then not give them really enough money to really come home, and so they ended up living in the cities. And so Rich went to electronics school down in Los Angeles. Jim, another one of the brothers, ended up in Cleveland, Ohio. And Abe ended up in Sacramento. And so that was really the post-secondary experience for most of the Indian people at that time, was everyone went on relocation programs.

DONIN: Why did they want the Natives to go to the cities?

BONGA: Well, because the whole idea, probably initiated in the late '50s or early '60s,—the federal government had always gone through different policies and programs for Native people, and so starting in the early '50s, the Bureau of Indian Affairs—the federal government tried to get out of Indian Affairs, and so they had all these different laws that were passed: Public Law 280, that turned over jurisdiction for criminal and civil to states. They were trying to basically, what?—yeah, stop providing money to tribes.

And so they had the relocation program, which was a major factor, which is they would take kids from the reservation areas or from their homes and send them to big cities and then let them get training as some type of technician so that that way, they would just join the general public, and that way they would eliminate the need for reservations and the need for programs.

DONIN: Oh, so they were trying to break down the family units.

BONGA: Yeah, what's called termination. And there was an actual federal program called termination, and it wasn't ended until I think President Nixon finally formally ended the termination era. And so for, like, twenty years there, the policy of the federal government was to get out of the Indian business.

So my brothers had gone through the relocation programs. They'd been sent off to schools or to training around the country. And so, you know, we had this history of service—you know, armed forces. And so I just figured that—in high school, I just figured, *Well, I'm going to end up going to the service and then getting out and either going on relocation or maybe have the G.I. Bill or something pay for college.* And so that was my plan in high school, to do that. And so I was just kind of anticipating or thinking that was my plan, and I really wanted to be a pilot, so I wanted to fly, so I figured I'd end up in the Air Force.

My brother Joe—he was the one closest to my age. He's about eight years old than I am. And he had graduated from high school, and he had wanted to make the armed forces, the Army, a career. That was his goal. So he joined the Army right out of high school. Was gone within a week from graduation. And he's been to Germany, had come back to the States and went through some training, and then ended up in Vietnam. And after Vietnam—he spent just over a year in Vietnam. He came home, and he said, "Whatever you do, don't you join the service." He said it was the worst experience he ever had. The thing in Vietnam was just—was not a good experience. And so he said, "Don't ever join the service." So I thought, *Well, hmm, okay. I guess I won't join the Air Force, then.*

So I was looking around. *What am I going to do?* And I thought, *Well, I'll go to Seattle University and play baseball.* That was my big goal. And so I knew that—you know, I'd always heard the rumor that Indian people got all this free money from the government to go to school. So my aunt, who worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C.—I called her up. Said, “I understand that Indians get free money to go to college, and I was wondering how does that happen? How can I get some?”

And she just said, “Well, you know, it's not the way it really works,”—that our tribe, the Minnesota Chippewa tribe, had contracted from the Bureau of Indian Affairs the higher education program, and so I'd have to write to the tribe and get an application for higher education and then go that route.

So she went ahead and gave me the address to Minnesota Chippewa tribe, who I had to write to, and I wrote that down, and I said, “Okay. Well, thanks.” And she goes, “Oh, oh! Since you're at it, why don't you write to Dartmouth? They're going to start a Native program, and they're looking for students.” And I go, “Where's Dartmouth?” and she goes, “Oh, it's in New York someplace.” She gets out the address. “Oh, no, it's not in New York; it's in New Hampshire.” So she gave me the address.

I went ahead, and I thought, *Well, okay.* So I wrote to Dartmouth. Said, “I heard you're starting a program. I'd be interested.” And so they sent me the application, a big thick—it seemed like a book—to fill out. And I had to write a whole—all kinds of stuff, take a bunch of tests and things. And didn't really—you know, did a little research. Found out Dartmouth was an Ivy League school and was pretty high academically and that kind of stuff. And so I just didn't really give it much thought, just completed the application and sent it off. Still expected to go to Seattle University and play baseball.

And so then in the spring of my senior year, I get accepted to Seattle U., so I thought, *Well, I'm gonna go there and play ball.* And about a week later, I got my acceptance from Dartmouth, and I thought, *Huh! Well, you know, I've never been to New England before. Maybe I'll go to Dartmouth.* So

I wrote back and said, “Okay, I guess I’ll come.” So that’s how I ended up here. It was just kind of a fluke.

DONIN: So Dartmouth at that point was really reaching out, recruiting for Native students.

BONGA: Correct. And that was, like—well, Class of 1970 from the high school, and so I had been told they were recruiting Native kids to come to Dartmouth. American Indian kids was what we were called. And so we came to Dartmouth. There was fifteen of us. It was called the American Indian Program. And kind of brought us in, and then I can remember—you know, you have all these Dartmouth trips and stuff that people go on, and so not many of us signed up for the Dartmouth trips.

DONIN: These are the freshman trips.

BONGA: Yes, freshman trips, yes. And I think there’s only about maybe three Native kids that had signed up for it, to go on these freshmen trips. And so the rest of us—you know, we got a letter from the American Indian program people and said that they would like us to come a couple of days early because we were going to go on a retreat to Harris Cabin. And so we came a little bit early, and we went to Harris Cabin. And that was kind of our freshmen trip.

DONIN: Oh. Where was this Harris Cabin?

BONGA: You know, it’s part of the Dartmouth Outing Club’s cabin.

DONIN: Oh, I see. Okay.

BONGA: So, you know, it wasn’t very far from here. I forget what the mountains are, but it is relatively close, and so they brought us up there and kind of just—“Here you go.” [Chuckles.] And so we got there, and—

DONIN: Did you have a leader?

BONGA: Well, the director for the American Indian Program at that time—I think it was John Olguin. He was there. He kind of had been pushing or trying to get it done. And so I think it was—not quite all 15 of us were there. I think the only

people that—Drew showed up late, and I'm not sure if Joe Stensgar and Parker—I think Parker was there. I'm not sure about Joe because I think he might have been on his freshman trip.

But we were up at Harris Cabin, and—you know, we're from all over the country. I was from Washington; Joe Stensgar was from—he was there. He was from—he's a Colville tribal member, but he grew up in Madras, Oregon. Dave Ipina, who was from the San Francisco area but he was a Yurok from northern California. And then from the Southwest there was Tony Yellow Hair. I think he was from Gallup—not Gallup. Oh, the school up north, where Northern Arizona University is located. Anyhow, he was from that town—well, outside of that town. Larry Long, who ended up my roommate—he was from Gallup. And then Herman Livingston, and I can't remember where Herman was from. Chinle, I think. And then from Oklahoma was Tom DeHaas.

DONIN: I can't believe you remember all the names! [Laughter.]

BONGA: And then, oh, Parker Sando was from Albuquerque. Dean—what was Dean's last name? [Paul] Dean Avritt. Dean Avritt was also from Albuquerque. And then there was Drew Ryce from Chicago. He was a Mohawk guy from Canada, but he was from Chicago. And then Hollis White, who was from St. Regis (upstate New York). And then Lamont "Monty" Smith, who was a Shinnecock from Long Island [New York].

And brought us all here, and, kind of, you know, here we were. And I can remember up at Harris Cabin we were just kind of sitting around talking and stuff, and I think John Olguin or somebody brought some beer, so everybody started drinking beer and stuff. And then, you know, eventually John Olguin got a little too inebriated, and he started saying about how the program is just for Indians and if we weren't really committed to be part of the Indian stuff that we shouldn't be there because we were taking somebody else's position. You know, he said that only 30 percent of us would graduate, if that much. It was just all kinds of stuff.

And I remember Tom DeHaas and I were kind of listening to all of this, and we kind of looked at each other and said, "You

know, we're gonna graduate. Whether or not we're gonna be all that heavily involved in everything, we don't know, but we're gonna graduate."

DONIN: Had you understood that you had to sort of be actively engaged in the Native American Program when they accepted you?

BONGA: No. You know, we just got accepted to this American Indian Program. I think most of us just kind of expected it to be more of a support program and stuff, rather than be an activist—we did have—oh, Bruce Oakes also showed up late, and Bruce Oakes had just come from Alcatraz. [Laughs.] His cousin had been one of the initial people that led the takeover of Alcatraz. And so Bruce comes in. He's got this long hair. He's got this blue jean cut-off jacket on, and on the back of the jacket is this leather thing that says "Alcatraz" with a fist on it, you know. And so we were kind of, "Whoop! This guy is part of the real movement" and all this stuff. And it turns out, found out that he was some prep school guy.

DONIN: [Laughs.]

BONGA: He was a Mohawk guy also from St. Regis. But whenever he would get drunk or whenever he would just kind of revert back to that upstate New York tone and stuff. I think he went to—what school? One of the prep schools, one of the big prep schools, anyhow.

And so it was just a real cross-group. It was a good group. And then also, you know, like, that first year, after we got accepted, we got this letter in the mail, and it said, "Where do you want to live on campus?" And then it says, "Do you want to have an American Indian roommate, you don't want to have an American Indian roommate, or you don't care?" And so most of us checked "We didn't care." Sent it back. And it turned out that they put I think it was about 13—12 of us on third floor, Chase Hall as freshmen. That kind of—

DONIN: Isn't that like ghettoizing you?

BONGA: Well, yeah! Actually, I think it was really a great thing that happened, because we were so different. You know, most of

the people that were here—what? At that time, 60 percent of the people were prep school students.

DONIN: Plus they were all men.

BONGA: They were all men. Didn't really realize that until you got here. And they were all tops of their class and just these high academic achievements and stuff, and here we were, just kind of—and they're all—most of them seemed like they were all rich.

One of the founders or president of the Hershey candy thing—his son was here, and then I think there was a Rockefeller in the group. You know, it was just lots and lots of money. And so for us—most of us came from very modest backgrounds. It was really different. And then, like, my roommate, Tony Yellow Hair—not Tony Yellow Hair but Larry Long—you know, he lived in a hogan.

DONIN: In a what?

BONGA: Hogan, kind of a traditional house for Navajos. I thought that was bad, and I said something to him one time, and he got real upset. He says, "Hey, don't you start saying that." His hogan was his home, and it was nice. It was comfortable. It was warm. And he said, "Don't you be bad-mouthin' that!" And I really learned something about that, you know? We were all really different and came from different backgrounds and stuff, but—

DONIN: Did you feel that there was sort of safety in numbers, that it was a good thing that you all were together?

BONGA: Oh, yeah! I mean, I think if we had been scattered that first year, I don't think we would have made it. I think some of the people might have made it, but I think the majority of us wouldn't have—you know, wouldn't have stuck around.

DONIN: So it was good to have the support of one another, even though you were all very different.

BONGA: Yes.

DONIN: And from different backgrounds.

BONGA: Yes.

DONIN: But you still felt safer with that group than you would have scattered.

BONGA: Absolutely. I think it was just a great way of getting to know—and becoming each other's safety net and back-up, kind of, you know, in more ways than one. I mean, we used to go off and people would get into fights and stuff, and there were always people that kind of got your back. And it was just not a very pleasant time on campus. And then you had the Indian symbol going on. And, like, myself, coming from Monroe, which there was not very many Indian people there, that—I just didn't give it a second thought that they were called Indians, Dartmouth Indians, until we went to our first football game.

And I remember we had about 12 of us, 10 of us. We went up and sat down in the stands, and, you know, just kind of excited about, you know, Ivy League football and college football. And we get up there, and we were waiting for the game to get started. People were warming up and stuff.

And then here comes this guy out onto the field, and he starts dancing around. He's dressed up like an Indian. And he wasn't Indian. Some white guy. And I remember sitting there, watching that, and then pretty soon you started hearing all this Wah Hoo Wah chants, and then you hear the drums for the band starting that tom-tom stuff that you hear on TV.

And I remember we all just kind of looked at each other, and I'm not sure, but I think we got up and left. And I never went back for another football game. In fact, I did everything I could not to be on campus for the fall. And it wasn't until I came back to work from '75 to '79—I never did go back to a football game.

DONIN: So it must have increased your sense of identity to have such an insult thrown in your face in a way that was so shocking and surprising.

BONGA: Yeah! I mean, I had never really given it much thought about being Indian before, until, you know, that actually starts happening and stuff and people didn't—they didn't understand, the students.

DONIN: Were you able to talk to anybody in the administration about what were they going to do about this Indian symbol business?

BONGA: Well, eventually we did. You know, at first I think it was mainly just surviving, just trying to do academics and that kind of stuff, but at the same time, you're faced with all this Indian symbol garbage and stuff, and the faculty—not the faculty but the alums and stuff. And it was just really difficult at that time to try to study and try to—you know, because it was hard enough academically for us, and it was hard enough not having any money to be able to go do things and stuff. And so it was a challenge to do that.

DONIN: You were in survival mode more than anything.

BONGA: Yeah. And then I can remember—there was one incident where John Olguin or the director of the program really did this outrageous thing to one of the—we had a special student. Was a female, Denise White, or Denise Dean at that time. And John Olguin for some reason just picked on her and just really insulted her one time. You know, it just really ticked off everybody. And so we just said, "We can't continue with this kind of stuff."

And so at spring term—and we decided—you know, trying to decide if we were all going to stay or not, and I was pretty much not going to come back. And then we thought, "Well, let's go let the president know." [Chuckles.] So we went and sat in his office until he met with us one time, one afternoon.

DONIN: This is John Kemeny.

BONGA: Yeah.

DONIN: You're sitting on his chair.

BONGA: Oh, really? Wow! [Laughter.] Wow!

But he did meet with us, and we went inside—and, see, all the freshmen, even the guys—there was a couple of guys—let’s say Parker and Joe—didn’t hang around much with us. All of us were there, and John Olguin was there, and John asked—well, you know, kind of a speech, and he goes, “Well, let’s hear from all the students.” Then he asked Joe and Parker, and Parker spoke. “Jeez, John, I don’t think you’ve done much, either.” And just like somebody deflated John Olguin. And so we made some suggestions.

If they were going to have a real Native program at Dartmouth, they had to do some things. First, you had to get rid of—you had to get a new director. Then they also had to fix—or not fix, get rid of Olguin, then establish a Native American Studies program, not for us, not for the Native students but for everybody else on campus, because nobody knew what it meant or what it was to be Native. Everybody thought we still rode horses and lived in tepees and that kind of stuff.

And so then we said, “Okay, get rid of Olguin, Native American Studies, find us a place that we can call our own, our own facility. Then you got to fix financial aid, and you got to fix admissions. And if you can do that, then I think Dartmouth has a chance of having a good program.” You know, eventually they—

DONIN: They listened.

BONGA: Yeah.

DONIN: Took a while.

BONGA: Yeah

DONIN: You guys were the real founders, though, the real pioneers.

BONGA: Well, I think—

DONIN: Unintentionally.

BONGA: Unintentionally. And as Drew was saying, if Olguin had not been so incompetent, such a jerk and had just been another bureaucrat, the program probably would never have got

started. You know, we all just would have left and not come back. But the way it was, it forced us to come together as a group.

DONIN: So when they replaced Olguin, was it Michael Dorris was next?

BONGA: No. No.

DONIN: Who was next?

BONGA: Well, see, that was it. At the end of our freshman year, we were interviewing people to fill Olguin's position, and there was a lady who—let's see, there was Reba Walker was her name, Reba Walker. And we'd interviewed probably four or five different people, and all the students had selected Reba. And so then we all left and went home for the summer, thinking we'd come back in the fall and Reba's going to be there. [Chuckles.]

And I didn't think I'd come back. I mean, I'd had enough of everything. And so I really wasn't planning on coming back. And then over the summer, they called—the program called—I can't remember who called. Bruce Oakes I think might have called, or somebody called me and said that—you know, "Are you going to come back or not?" And I said, "Well, I don't think so." He goes, "Well, why don't you go to Kicking Horse Job Corps Center?"

See, when I was a freshman, my freshman winter I think it was or spring, I had gone with "Doc" Dey from the Tucker Foundation out to Kicking Horse Job Corps Center in Montana, on the Flathead Reservation and had—you know, established a Tucker internship program there, where Dartmouth would send students out to work with the Native corpsmen.

And so myself, two other non-Indian guys, Bill Newcomb and Gerry Bowe, were selected to go to Kicking Horse, and we were going to get academic credit for it—education credit, because they had an education program there. And we just had to write some stuff up in journals and things, and send them—you know, when we got back.

And so they talked me into going. Okay, I said I'd go to Kicking Horse. So I went to Kicking Horse and got three academic credits there for writing papers and whatnot. And Gerry and Bill were just great guys, and they were probably—what?—the closest thing you could call as a friend who were not Native that I had here. They were just—yeah, just good guys.

And so I came back. I decided to continue at Dartmouth. I came back in the winter of my sophomore year, and I had to pick a language, and then they also said, "Okay, Class of '74, we're going to go on the Dartmouth Plan because we're going to let in women." *Well, all right!*

DONIN: [Chuckles.]

BONGA: Then we could graduate in eleven terms instead of twelve terms if we went on the Dartmouth Plan, but the Dartmouth Plan—we had to come one summer, take the fall off. That was no problem. So I jumped on the Dartmouth Plan here in the winter. Then I took spring and summer off and went back to Monroe, went back home and worked back there for the natural resource department for the state.

And then for my junior year—I had petitioned, as a sophomore, to the deans here to let me go to the University of Minnesota, let me take Ojibwe, my native language. It was a two-year program just like you have here—you know, Spanish. Everything was a two-year program here, and it was the same over there. You learned how to read, write it, speak it, some cultural stuff. And so I petitioned the college to let me transfer to University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, take all those courses and then transfer everything back as long as they were comparable courses.

So I had to find comparable courses in history and psychology and stuff there. And as long as I got a C⁺ or better, they transferred. So then I took Ojibwe there for a year and took some history courses and psychology and sociology courses, intro courses, and didn't lose a step.

DONIN: Great.

BONGA: And transferred everything back here. And so I was gone my entire junior year, which was good. [Chuckles.] And then I come back for the summer. Had to do my mandatory summer on campus then. And then for the fall term—Bea Medicine was a professor in Native American studies. Michael Dorris had been the director. And so Bea had been the visiting professor, and so I got to know Bea, and we were talking and stuff, and she asked me if I would do a Native American Studies fellowship. I said, “Well, sure.”

And so we worked out this fellowship where I went to the Standing Rock Reservation, which was her home reservation, to do a feasibility study for an educational FM radio station.

DONIN: Oh!

BONGA: And so we worked it out with National Indian Education Association that had a library program there. And so we had it lined up where I would be out of their offices, and they would supervise and all that other stuff, and I would do this feasibility study. So I went there and did that and got credit for that.

And then I came back for winter-spring, and I was done. [Laughs.]

DONIN: Wow! Do you think if you had had to be here all four years, you wouldn't have made it?

BONGA: Ah. Nah.

DONIN: Because it was so unwelcoming?

BONGA: Yeah. I mean, I just didn't like most of the people here. Didn't like the professors. Didn't really care for the students. And there was really not much—

DONIN: There was no support for you. I mean, as hard as they were trying to get this program off the ground, for you guys that were here in the early '70s, there was no way to support you.

BONGA: Yes.

DONIN: So you really sort of—

BONGA: Survived. [Laughs.]

DONIN: Survival by being off campus.

BONGA: That's how I did it.

DONIN: Yes.

BONGA: And everybody—you know, like Drew and Tom DeHaas and all those guys—we were freshmen together. They always give me a bad time about graduating from Dartmouth and never being here.

DONIN: Yes.

BONGA: And I was always, “Well, yeah.” [Chuckles.]

DONIN: That was the key to survival.

BONGA: That was a key.

DONIN: Well, they survived in a different way, which was transferring.

BONGA: Yes.

DONIN: Wow. So the idea of spending any extended period of time here just wasn't going to work.

BONGA: Not for me.

DONIN: No.

BONGA: As a student.

DONIN: And it wasn't the academics that pushed you away; it was the sort of social setting.

BONGA: Pretty much. I mean, academics were tough—you know, hard. But they could have been doable, but any support services or just being so alienated here and—it wouldn't have—I wouldn't have survived.

DONIN: How did they manage to recruit more students to come here?

BONGA: Well, you know, I think the name of Dartmouth; I think the idea that it's an Ivy League school and they have this new program, this new Native American office and this new Native American Studies program. I think that helped. But, you see, when I left—I was going to go to law school, and I had gotten accepted at the University of Washington Law School in Seattle, and that's where I was going to go, and during the summer I was going to go to this pre-Indian law program at University of New Mexico in Albuquerque.

And so I was at home in Monroe, and I get this phone call from Duane Bird Bear. Duane was an old buddy from Dartmouth. He was working for United Scholarship Service. And he asked me if I would be willing to come take his job so he could go to law school at the University of Denver. And I thought, *Well, sure.*

So I wrote Seattle, University of Washington, saying, "Thanks but no thanks. I'll come [at a] later date." And I went to United Scholarship Service and took his position, and so I was there for about nine months. And, see, before I left Dartmouth, they were trying to fill a position with the Native American office. And so I had applied, but they had selected some guy from—Papillon, I think, from upstate—no, not from upstate but from Montana. I think he was a Blackfeet. And so I guess I was second on the list or something, but anyhow, I didn't get it, so I went home and went to Denver.

Then Mike Dorris calls me up and says, "Hey, Papillon's leaving, and we would like to have you come back and head up the program." I thought, *Well, you know, maybe I could help fill that void and offer support to the students.* So I came back. I stayed around for four and a half years or so.

DONIN: How was that?

BONGA: Much, much better. The first year and a half, it was—you know, it was still—I was getting used to the program. Ralph Manuel was my boss, and he was still a part of that old guard.

DONIN: But Mike Dorris was here by then, right?

BONGA: Yeah, but he was in Native American Studies, which is completely different than the Native American office. We worked together on the Native American Council and things like that, but, you know, he was—I hadn't realized all the issues and stuff with Abel, his son, and it wasn't until later that I actually realized all the crud that he was going through with Abel and his two other children.

And so I came back and recruited students and tried to convince them to come and—you know, I'll provide assistance and support and help you get through. And so then people started coming. And I was able to convince a number of them that—you know, "Go home and learn your language," so kids went back to Navajo Community College or take courses there to learn Navajo. A Lakota girl—lady, who went to Black Hills State College and got courses there. So I was able to help them get through school.

DONIN: Help them get off campus.

BONGA: Yeah.

DONIN: Hmm.

BONGA: And then I also was a real big proponent of internships, and so I was off trying to get people to go do internships around the country.

DONIN: Again, to get them off campus?

BONGA: Yeah.

DONIN: Uh-huh. Yes, I was reading about you in *The D*, and there were some descriptions of what you were doing. You also got a bunch of grant money too, didn't you?

BONGA: Some.

DONIN: From several sources. So what about Greg Prince? He played a role.

BONGA: Oh, he played a major role. I mean, he was kind of—the program was kind of assigned or given to him by Kemeny, and so Greg was a great resource. He was extremely helpful. And then there was John Bryant in the Tucker Foundation, who was just hugely important. I mean, whenever we needed somehow to figure out how to get something paid for, we'd go to John, and he'd help us figure it out. A great resource as far as how to apply and how to do this and how to—you know. And he was just always there.

DONIN: So you learned a lot when you were doing the administrative job.

BONGA: Oh! You know, like, before that—see, like, I was an intern for work-study in the Native American office, the winter-spring of freshmen year. And that's when Olguin was kind of being pushed out of the picture. We did the first national Indian debate tournament. We did a bunch of visits to different schools in the area, trying to work things together. And so that, and when I was working—you know, all kinds of experience as far as student services and those type of things.

DONIN: Did you help organize the first Pow-Wows?

BONGA: The first Pow-Wow? Yeah. And then when I came back for those four or five years, the Native American office did everything. I mean, we did everything. [Chuckles.] And so, yeah, I learned how to run Pow-Wows really good, and then trying to cut back the budget because it seemed like a huge amount of money was being spent every year on this Pow-Wow that all the dollars were going to people from the outside and whatnot and the students weren't really benefiting that much. And so we had to figure—you know, stop paying people to come to our Pow-Wow, things like that. So, yeah. We did that.

And I had this office assistant, Karen Wright. She was a non-Indian lady, who I think really developed into—you know, she was just a local girl. Went to Hartford High School. So she had all these new Native people in the community, students that would come in, into our office, and if I wasn't there for some reason, she would get to know them and talk to them. And she was a great typist. I mean, before computers. I

mean, 90 words a minute. It was just unreal. But she would type everybody's papers for them. And it was just really good that—you know, she introduced the students to some of the community outside of Dartmouth, and I think that really helped.

DONIN: Mm-hm.

BONGA: She would do all that type of stuff. She was kind of good answering questions for parents and things. She was a big help.

DONIN: So it sounds to me like your undergraduate years here were really painful and difficult—

BONGA: Mmm.

DONIN: —but that your work experience here was a much more positive experience.

BONGA: Yeah. I mean, especially, as I said, the first year and a half wasn't so—it still kind of reminded me of being a student here, with Manuel and trying to work through—who the heck was the dean at the time? Ralph was—and the students.

DONIN: He was the first-year dean?

BONGA: No, no, he was, like, the dean of the college.

DONIN: Oh, I see, yeah.

BONGA: And he was one of those old-time guys, so there wasn't much support in the administration. And then I guess what really helped, I think, the program—but also besides Karen, who knew all these ladies in the area—but I got to start to play ball and mingle with the local community here, who—some of them were Dartmouth grads. Some weren't but—you know, they'd gone to school elsewhere and stuff. And so we developed a really good relationship with the non-Indian community here in town that were young, and the students, NAD students. And we had the NAD House, and we had all kinds of activities going on at the NAD House—you know, volleyball tournaments, and that's where all these outside, non-Dartmouth people would come. The students just hit it

off with the non-Dartmouth people. I lived with two or three of them. We had a house up in Etna, and all the NAD students would come up there, just to get away and relax.

DONIN: So you had a real community here when you were working.

BONGA: Yeah.

DONIN: But as a student, how would you have described your community here?

BONGA: NAD House.

DONIN: NAD House.

BONGA: Third floor, Chase. That was our community. And that was pretty—probably pretty destructive. I mean, we drank a lot. [Chuckles.] I mean, we—yeah. It was pretty crazy. And, you know, the only time we ever went to the frats was to get some beer or something, and there was always somebody getting in a fight or—you know.

DONIN: So the frats—the Native students would get in a fight with somebody at the frat house?

BONGA: Yeah.

DONIN: So they were not welcoming.

BONGA: Generally, yeah, that was true.

DONIN: Did it help when women came on campus, when coeducation came in?

BONGA: I think so. I wasn't here when it first began, but when I came to work, there had been—about second or third year, and I think that was the start of making things a little bit normal. But even the women were still getting treated kind of like the way we got treated. So it was kind of making us angry, making the Native students—we had gone through that, and we still went through it, but—you know.

DONIN: You could commiserate with what they were going through.

- BONGA: Yeah. Yeah.
- DONIN: Wow. And what was the graduation rate for you first 13 or 15?
- BONGA: Um, let's see. Who graduated? On time. Myself, Tony Yellow Hair, Joe Stensgar and Parker Sando, so four out of the first 15. Then Bruce Oakes, Tom DeHaas and Butch Guerue graduated two, three years on down the road. (And Eva Smith too). And so probably about eight of us.
- DONIN: That's pretty good!
- BONGA: Yeah. Yep. More than the 30 percent we were told only would make it.
- DONIN: Yeah, yeah. But not with much help from the college, it sounds like.
- BONGA: No. I'd say no. Yeah.
- DONIN: Was there any remedial help for you?
- BONGA: Yeah. I mean, that was—
- DONIN: If you needed it.
- BONGA: Well, actually, you know, the first year, which was really kind of good—you know, we were all put in, like, Math 3, English 3—you know, you had 3, 4, 5, and English 5 was the normal English class, so we were put in English 3 and 4 or whatever. I remember Drew got put in that. [Laughs.] And he got all upset. He had 800 SAT or something.
- DONIN: He was not happy.
- BONGA: Yeah.
- DONIN: [Chuckles.]
- BONGA: So, yeah. And then we had a couple of tutors. Steve Brockway, who was a pre-med student—I think he was a senior when we were freshmen. And he lived with us in Chase Hall. He was in one of those single rooms up there.

And he was kind of our live-in tutor. When I think about Steve—he convinced all of us we should be doctors, and so a whole bunch of us took Math 3 or whatever that calculus course was. [Chuckles.]

DONIN: [Laughs.] What was your major, after all?

BONGA: History major. When I came to Dartmouth, I wanted to be a history major because I knew I'd either go into law or teaching, and history would be good. It came easy to me. I enjoyed history, and so that's what I was going to be. So he taught me to be a doctor, pre-med, and—

DONIN: [Chuckles.]

BONGA: One course, and I said, *Nah!* So I went back and became a history major.

DONIN: Did anybody end up being a doctor, of that class?

BONGA: Of that class? No. I think Tony ended up with a biology degree. Joe—I think he was a history major, too. Parker was history, or government. And Butch Guerue was Russian major. He ended up—he's a lawyer. Drew—well, Drew left.

DONIN: So were you here when Drew came back after he'd started at Oberlin?

BONGA: Yeah, because—well, I was working then.

DONIN: Oh, I see, yes.

BONGA: And so he came back, and so I was able to do what I could, just kind of entertain, to—whatever. It's always good to have him back around. Then Tom DeHaas came back when I was working, so I helped those guys get through. That was kind of fun.

DONIN: So this was a really brave thing you all did, and you didn't even know what you were heading in for when you came here.

BONGA: Yeah. We just thought we'd go to college and get the support from the college to develop this program, and that was it.

DONIN: So was your family surprised when you became sort of more—your identity as a Native must have been—what’s the right word?—enriched or enlivened when you came here. And going back to learn your Native language and all of that. Did that surprise them?

BONGA: My dad got all upset because I said I was going to transfer to the University of Minnesota and take Chippewa, transfer back for my foreign language requirement, and he got all upset. “Foreign language? That’s not a foreign language.” [Laughs.] “We were here before they were.”

DONIN: He’s right.

BONGA: Yeah. And so I said, “It’s a second language, Dad,” so he eventually calmed down, conceded. And, you know, I guess—you know, I’m not sure if it was really—if I really had changed all that much, because I’d always known I was Indian, Chippewa. That was good that I went to learn the language and stuff and get to meet with all my relatives and stuff in Minnesota, who I didn’t know because we could never get enough money to go back there to visit, so that was good, yeah.

DONIN: And you’ve made your career working with Natives.

BONGA: Yeah.

DONIN: Is that right?

BONGA: Yep, yep, yep.

DONIN: Yeah. That’s a good byproduct of your difficult time here.

BONGA: Yeah, I guess so. You know, when I came here, I knew I wanted to be either a teacher or a lawyer. I figured I’d work for some Indian tribe, some small Indian tribe, and now I work for a small Indian tribe, and we do pretty well, and I think I’ve helped that.

DONIN: So you fulfilled your goals.

BONGA: Yeah.

DONIN: Uh-huh. So when you step back and look at Dartmouth now, what do you think about how it would be for the current students who are coming from a tribe somewhere in the country—come here? What do you think they find now?

BONGA: I think they probably still find some—some—some what? Non-support. Probably a little bit of prejudice just because they're Native and that they're really part of that, that whole program. I think that's still there. But I don't think that there's quite as overt issues and problems for them, so I think that's good. I mean, that's kind of what we had hoped would happen when we all got started. It was kind of our vision, I guess, seeing the school develop in a way—well, see, we were always afraid that Dartmouth would just eventually turn into kind of like a diploma mill, where they'd bring in the brightest Indian students and then just kind of give them a degree after they graduated, and these people then would just become Dartmouth grads and not really, I guess, committed to Native issues and things. And I think that out of that first group, I think we would be pretty happy that, while it's not 100 percent, there's still I think a good percentage of the Native students here that are concerned and still want to be of some service of some type in the future, to the Native communities and people. I think that's good.

And there's others that are going to be successful in something else, and that's fine, too. That's what we always had kind of hoped, that we'd have these successful people who were Natives, but we'd also have that core group or that group that would go back and work with the tribes.

DONIN: Do you think that the prejudice and the difficult time that you had here—did that sort of cement your decision to devote your life to working for Native populations?

DONIN: I don't think it cemented it. I think it just kind of—because even if I hadn't gone to Dartmouth, I think I always would have been working in some type of Native programs or issues and stuff. I mean, I was pretty much set on doing that, and that's one of the reasons I came, because they were going to start this new program and I'd have a chance to be part of that and help it grow and be successful.

- DONIN: I don't know if you have children, but would you ever have wanted your children to go here?
- BONGA: [Laughs.] My daughter—when she was looking for schools, I talked her into coming back to visit, and so she was going to do a visit. We came. It was on a weekend, and it was a Sunday morning, and so I was kind of giving her a tour, kind of walking her through. We went through Baker Library downstairs, and the place was packed.
- DONIN: On a Sunday morning!
- BONGA: Sunday morning. And she just kind of—[Makes sound.]
- DONIN: [Laughs.]
- BONGA: She was not that interested. [Laughter.] That was a little too much. So she ended up going to Whitworth in Spokane, another private school. You know, it was Sunday morning. The place—you know, she just—
- DONIN: That's interesting. That's interesting. [Laughs.]
- Okay, let's see here. What have I not asked you about? So I don't know if Monroe is rural or citified, but did your sense of belonging here—was it impacted at all by the fact that you were in a rural setting like this?
- BONGA: When I was growing up, Monroe was a little town. It was about, I think, 1,700 people. High school was 555 in four grades. My class was the second class with a hundred students or more in a graduating class. So it was a small community. And coming here—you know, coming to Dartmouth—it was small, kind of like home. Hanover is small. It took, like, three hours to get from Boston up to here because it was just the bus. The freeways weren't completed yet. And so, you know, if it had been just a regular co-ed college back in those days, I think it would have been really good. It would have been a good experience. But it wasn't. So I don't think it really mattered what—
- DONIN: The setting didn't matter.
- BONGA: Yeah.

DONIN: Right. Some people seemed to feel they would be impacted coming here, especially if they're from a more populated area and they found the isolation up here has an impact on their experience, either good or bad. But it's not necessarily true for everybody.

BONGA: Right.

DONIN: Yeah, yeah.

So—how do I ask this question? Do you feel that that first class of you 13 or whatever, 15.

BONGA: Fifteen.

DONIN: Do you feel that you have allowed the future classes that came after you to maybe have more of a sense of belonging here than you did because you sort of opened the door for them?

BONGA: I'm not sure about the feeling of belonging as much as being able to succeed. I think what we did kind of set the college in motion to be more supportive and make this place a better place for Native kids to come to.

DONIN: When you come back to campus, do you feel like you belong here?

BONGA: Belong here? I feel like I'm a good visitor. [Laughs.] As far as belonging, when they used to have the Native American House on 18 North Park, yeah. Now this place seems a little too large.

DONIN: Oh, really?

BONGA: Yeah, the Native American House.

DONIN: Do you come back for reunions?

BONGA: No. No. You know, the Native American reunion, the 40-year program and those types of reunions, yeah. I come back. Don't miss those. And I come back here probably about—I'd

say on the average once every—every what?—15 months or so, year and a half, 16 months.

DONIN: That's often.

BONGA: Yeah. I mean, I come back quite a bit, but it's not so much to come here. [Chuckles.] I mean, I've got all these really good friends now that—unfortunately, though, I think most of them have moved away from the community. There are still some, Star Johnson and—you know, some of those guys are still here, and it's good to come back to see them.

DONIN: Mm-hm. But what really draws you back here is the Native American community.

BONGA: Native American Program.

DONIN: Program, yeah.

BONGA: Not so much the community as much as, you know, just if I can be of assistance, show people—you know, anybody can get through here; it's just a matter of finding out a good way to do it, and I try to tell students about my experiences as ~~found~~ as I found it best for me not to be here but still get the academic credits.

And, you know, people I work with—they all look at Dartmouth as being a real opportunity for Native students. The chairman out there always says his hope is that we have some Kalispells come out here and go to college someday. So that's good.

DONIN: You'd be a great one to convince them of that.

BONGA: Now, yeah—they don't have to go through a bunch of a stuff.

DONIN: Well, yeah, but you'd have to tell them the secret of succeeding here is to not be here.

BONGA: Yeah. Yeah.

DONIN: And that's not really the college experience a lot of people are looking for.

BONGA: [Laughs.] I know, and it doesn't fit—

DONIN: A residential college is supposed to allow you to be here and have a community here. Do you think it'll ever be possible for Natives to feel that they have a community here?

BONGA: Yeah, I think that that's possible, but I think just because of the location and the smallness of the community, or the numbers, it's never really going to be like home.

DONIN: Right. Right.

Okay, Dave. Well, I think we're done, unless you have other comments you want to make.

BONGA: No, I don't think so. I think—yeah.

DONIN: You're done.

BONGA: Good.

DONIN: Okay. Thank you. Let me turn these off.

[End of interview.]