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An Oral History of the CCNY 1960's SEEK**

**Interview with Marvina White
Interviewer: Sean Molloy**

January 27, 2015

In 1965, City College Launched it's "Pre-Bac" program by admitting and supporting 113 poor and working class students who did not qualify under CCNY's traditional standards. (Levy 1965). Pre-Bac was a huge success. After one year, 72% of its students were still studying at CCNY. Over half had a "C" average or higher. (Berger 1966 3). Renamed "SEEK" in 1966, the program got even better: 85% of the new Fall 1966 and Fall 1967 SEEK students were still studying at CCNY after one year. (Berger 1969 Table 40). SEEK proved that students who had been labeled as inadequate could successfully compete in an elite college. Close to 40% of the 1965-67 SEEK students would graduate from City College by 1972. (Frost 1972 1). One of those graduates was Marvina White. Marvina went on to teach college writing at CCNY, Princeton University and Stanford University for 33 years. She directed the Princeton Writing Program from 1994 to 1998.

Marvina White: "Stand up, Stupid, and go to the back of the classroom."

I grew up in Upper Manhattan at Dykeman Street in a – I think it was called the Dykeman Houses then. I didn't think of it or realize that it was a project for years. I have to say.

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White: But in any case, I grew up in a family where my being a girl – and I think a lot of it [00:02:00] had to do with my being a girl – meant that what my parents really wanted for me, was to be able to cook and sew and know how to vacuum and clean and all of those things I did. But going to school was really not – I mean my parents had not graduated from high school. My father ran

away from home when he was 15 and he became a Merchant Marine. My mother grew up in the Bronx and neither of them – I wouldn't say that they didn't exactly value education, but they saw my desire to go to school as a – as something that would mean that I will be alone for my life, that nobody would want to marry me.

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White: But in any case I began having to cook dinner for everyone from the time I was 11 years old. And therefore school took a back seat pretty much. I mean there were things I did, because I really did love school.

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White: When I was in third grade in public school, in Upper Manhattan I think it may have been, I don't know, PS 152 or PS 52, I had a teacher who... I was about to do something, and I was... and then at that point getting to third grade I was a happy,... I loved school, I loved my teachers, I was happy to be there. But this moment came when I was trying to make out something on the mimeograph sheet. We were going to – I could actually say the words, I remember what they were supposed to be. But I couldn't read all of it and I was somewhat shy. So I didn't – I struggled around it and the teacher suddenly just started yelling at me and just told me, 'Stand up, Stupid, and [00:04:00] go to the back of the classroom! All you Negroes need to move back to Harlem!' And so, I mean I was seven years old, and I just – so I got up, I went in the back of the room because I was a good girl, but I couldn't stay there. I just burst into tears and ran out of the room and ran down to the principal's office to try to confess.

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White: But it wound up being that my grandfather wrote a letter to the teacher who did this, telling her and threatening her essentially to never speak to me that way again, to... and talking about the value of Negroes in the country and in this world. That moment though really kind of never left me. I mean, I've never forgotten it and I think it also at the time, because it was 1956, a lot of things were happening to black students, to little girls and boys that made the headlines in the daily news, on the newspaper all the time – in the news all the time. I think, actually there was always a little bit of doubt implanted in me, around my being less than and maybe not really as smart as or not as capable – and

maybe I didn't really belong, maybe we shouldn't have been in the classroom, maybe all the Negroes should move back to Harlem, although I didn't even live in Harlem when she had said this, which was one point that my grandfather pointed out. This was a neighborhood school I was in, but she was talking to me as if I didn't belong there.

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White:

I, in middle school discovered that I was, or junior high school is what we called it, I discovered that I was really good in science. I always did like science. I was not the great math student, but I was [00:06:00] good in science and I loved helping people, as a result of my Catholicism I think. So I was always involved in some charity or some volunteer work. And so at one point I just thought it will be great if I became a doctor. And there was a series of books called, "So you want to be a..." whatever. So this book was "So you want to be a doctor" and I bought that book and I carried it around with me everywhere. I carried it around, like on Easter I brought it to my – to dinner at my grandparents' house and for the most part it set me up for ridicule within my family. Somebody looked at it and said "Do you know how long it takes to be a doctor, you will be an old maid by then, and you don't want to be spinster." So there were, there were those pushes on the part of the family and at the same time my grandfather thought that I was smart. I mean, I was his favorite grandchild and I spent a lot of time on his lap and a lot of time talking with him. He went to DeWitt Clinton High School which was a pretty good school in the Bronx in those years. And considering that he was born in 1903, going to DeWitt Clinton was a big deal.

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White:

So, although I didn't have the support of my family, I was determined to go to college and I actually had a savings account that I just established, because I used to work at a shoe store after school, and on Sundays days, and on Saturdays. And so what happened is, a big fight in our house when I said I wanted to go to college and they wouldn't sign a loan form that I had got from – I don't even know where, I don't even remember that part. What I remember is that they basically decided to take the money that I had in my account and say that I owed it to them, because I, you know, I lived under their roof and I owed it to them because I [00:08:00] I never paid rent and I didn't pay for my own support, so that money was gone. But I was determined,

during this time I probably – I think, I know I did, I actually also ran away from home. So I was determined to get out of there and if they weren't going to support me, I figured a way and so...

“The whole experience was one of human beings engaging with ideas.”

I discovered the Pre-Bac program as a result of some neighborhood outreach that I learned about from a friend. My grandfather's address allowed me to apply, because I didn't live in the catchment area for SEEK at the time that I applied. And with my grandfather's support I submitted my application and I got in and it was really the – it changed my life, so...

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White:

So in Barbara's class, in the summer of '66, I arrived. I, maybe this may be, may be irrelevant, but nevertheless I got myself the clothes I thought a college student would wear. I went down to the village. I got certain shoes. I had a certain bag. I carried my things in a particular way. But mainly the classroom which I can actually see in my mind's eye right now – it was in Mott Hall; there were probably about eight or nine of us in the room. Barbara assigned a couple of books: *Native Son*, *Invisible Man*. We listened to her; we read those books; we listened to her give us, really kind of brief lecture/discussion starter, exciting as she walked around [00:10:00] the room talking to us, looking us in our eye. There was no blackboard. It was not a classroom designed. It was a seminar room. There was a big table. We sat around the table, the teacher walked around. It was – the whole experience was just one of human beings engaging with ideas. And I was now a student, but I was also a person whose ideas and written words meant something to the teacher, specifically meant something in relation to what I was reading, how I was thinking about what I was reading. And her response to me was very much – I mean I – she may have even written actually on the page *Marvina* at the end in her comments, *Marvina I like this or that and this is what I think you need to do*. But in the – on the pages of those papers, she responded to specific ideas and thoughts I had about the books that – and maybe even what she said, that made me feel like I was having a conversation with her about my thoughts. I had never had that experience before. I never had anyone actually read something I had written, tell me what he thought about or she thought about what I had written without a grade and actually in this class there were no grades. It was really read, talk, write, listen to what the teacher thinks

about what you're saying, look at how you might write this paper better, look at how well you did this, whatever that particular thing was. But it was the most human experience I've ever had in the classroom [00:12:00]. It was also everything I imagined wonderful. I never wanted those sessions to end, and I think...college to be, everything, including the teacher. It was just

“They were devoted to seeing that we became successful, functioning students....”

So from – in September when I first started, what I had, what I had were – I think I probably took one class that was not for credit, that was a composition course. And then there were other classes that I took that were mainstream classes. I think what they did was to look at what we did in high school and see where they thought we might be able to function in the mainstream.

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White:

But for me it was to come to school, go to classes, do what I needed to do in those classrooms – in that classroom, meet with my counselor to talk about how it was going.

The most wonderful part of it was the devotion on the part of the faculty and the staff of the program itself. There was a way in which I felt really cherished by them; they – I felt as if their whole – they were devoted to seeing that we became successful, functioning students on that campus and in our lives.

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White:

Barbara and Betty lived in an apartment building, the same apartment building. And so Barbara would have these, these times when she would invite students up to her house and Betty would come and we would all sit around talking about the women's consciousness raising or whatever, sometimes politics, very often the Harlem renaissance or some, some ideas that came out of the classroom that were so exciting. Because for me [00:14:00] it was the first time that I'd ever understood that there were Black people in New York even who were – who had written books and written plays and, you know, produced art. And, you know, the Black Arts Movement was big at that time, by the way, and Barbara and her boyfriend, who was a poet, were very involved in that movement and therefore as students we became involved in that movement – I did, actually not everybody, but I did.

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White:

And so what happened to me at City College was that I, I saw – I learned how to become a student. I'd always been a student, but I was student who was kind of winging it, trying to manage, taking care of my brother, cooking food, making sure certain groceries were in, doing the laundry. I mean, I had those tasks to do and so normally I was squeezing in my school work some kind of way for the most part. I was always looking for some way to save myself, this much I know.

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White:

But for the most part the program itself represented for me hope that I could understand and become a really high achieving student. And by the way, I had been labeled, I don't know by whom now, as an underachiever. I mean it was always for many years, I was seen as somebody who could do better, but actually wasn't doing better. So I performed pretty well on IQ tests and

“Many of us were having difficulty... understanding how to do the work, given what was happening to us at home.”

In addition [00:16:00] to the experience with Barbara and the fabulous teachers that I had in my first year, in my first semester, Betty Rawls and the counseling staff in particular showed me the ways in which my psychological and emotional self needed to get – I needed to become... I don't, I don't... they were interfer... it was my – what turns out to probably have been depression or certain struggles I was having, were really interfering with my ability to perform in the classroom. And I think that the – a certain kind of, you know – my having to leave campus early and get home. By then my parents moved to Mt. Vernon, so I was having to get to the train station, take the D train up to 205th Street or whatever that stop was, and then take a bus, and then walk to the house and cook dinner. That meant that I didn't get to go the library, it meant I didn't get to join any clubs, it meant that I didn't go to lectures, it meant that I – all the ways in which college at least in my imagination, and then actually really for some people exists, didn't exist for me pretty much except in the classroom.

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What happened as a result of meeting with Betty was, it became clear that my performance in the classroom was suffering as a result of the ways in which I was having to manage life at home. And I wasn't the only one. I mean a lot of the students, I don't

know how many, but many of us were having difficulty not with the work itself, but with understanding how to do the work given [00:18:00] what was happening to us at home. So there were other people who had no place to study. They didn't have the same chores, but they had some other way that they weren't able to, to do the work required and to really fully engage in everything City had to offer.

And so, by the end of my first semester, I was on probation and Betty and Barbara decided that they needed to get in touch with my parents to tell them that this opportunity that I had was going to be lost if they kept insisting that I do all of the things they wanted me to do at home. And also there was a suspicion on the part of – I don't know if it was my father or both of them, that I really wasn't probably going to the library, but I was probably meeting a boy or doing some other – something, and that was their fear. I mean...

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White:

And unfortunately it meant that those things interfered with my studying. I don't – they had no idea of what it meant to be a college student, none.

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White:

Betty Rawls, actually Betty and Barbara were best friends which was good for me, because I connected – the two of them, they really were the women and the two people in SEEK who basically rescued me. Betty called my mother and suggested that she and my father come down to school and meet with her to see, to understand what it was that I needed to become successful, because I was really – I was on probation as I said. And I was also struggling a lot [00:20:00]. I don't quite – I know that I spent time on the phone with Betty. I mean she would – she was available. I had her phone number. I remember being in the phone booth in Cohen Library at one point talking to her about work that I needed to do and how I was having a hard time doing it. And I actually think that conversation led to her understanding better what would help me. And I don't know when the SEEK dormitory idea came up, but it seems to me that it came pretty quickly as a result of people like me who were having trouble in their homes. And so with Betty, and I mean I saw her regularly, I saw her in the classroom, out of the classroom, I...

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White:

So what these people – primarily, Mina, Barbara and Betty – saw was that I and some other students needed to get out of their houses. And so they established the dormitory which was in a single room occupancy hotel really on 71st Street and Broadway. They managed to get four floors I think in that building and argue for those of us, and I needed an argument, to get out of our houses. And so what was fabulous, that – those two things that people who were teaching and the opportunity to move into the dorm really meant that I was able to graduate and that I became a student. That – the experience of living with other students and studying, actually having something called the study lounge and places where we would all gather and talk about what we’re reading or sometimes [00:22:00] we would gather and just do our work, it was a dream. That was the second sort of fabulous thing that happened. And part of it is, when you think about City College, it’s an urban campus. There was no place to have a dormitory. There were no places to have the dream college experience, the way that, you know, people have when they go away to school. And yet the dorm allowed for some of that to happen.

And for me it meant the certain kind of delight in going and saying to myself from this time to that time I’m going to read my psych books, and I’m going to start writing my paper, and I’m going to take a break and get a snack and talk to my friend so and so about this. I mean that – it was, it was heaven. It was heaven. I just – at home I mean I barely had a place to be – I shared a room with my brother until I was 16 years old. So – and then when I went to City, we had moved to another place, but it was the first time I had a room of my own, but basically I didn’t have any way of doing my work at home. So the dorm enabled me to actually become a student fully.

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White:

Betty, I don’t remember when this happened, but Betty at one point was engaged to someone and they decided to go on a plane ride to meet his parents and she wound up disappearing for, I don’t know how many number of weeks. Her – their plane crashed and she died. And that was a very big loss for me.

“I learned how to express myself in ways, and I learned that what I had to say was worth expressing.”

White:

[00:24:00] At least which... Writing and – was always something that I was – that I did well. Of course once I got to City, I realized there were things I needed to fix. And I didn’t really

know fully how to fix them. And at one point Barbara, it must be Barbara, Barbara suggested that maybe I could go and see Mina Shaughnessy, who had an office in a hut next to the running track down South Campus. And, and so I went to see her. I introduced myself and she was, she was so lovely. I mean she was also – she was physically beautiful. She had a very sort of sweet, soft, embracing voice, and appearing at her door meant that she was yours. I mean that I never went to her office where she would say “I can’t see you now, can you come back at this time.” I don’t know how that works, because I don’t really know how she could possibly have been so free or maybe it’s just in my imagination, I don’t know. But the thing is that she – I brought her a paper that I was struggling with.

My main problem at the time were run-on sentences. Well, there were two things, run-on sentences and the idea that I couldn’t begin to figure out how to flesh out an argument. I would say what I had to say and that was the end of that and, you know, Barbara and other teachers were kind of trying to help me, but I really didn’t – I didn’t get it. So Mina was so embracing. She looked at the paper, the first paper I took her, and she pointed out precisely where this thing that I thought was a sentence [00:26:00] was actually run on. But we didn’t focus so much on the grammar and that’s not just to say the grammar is not important, but she talked about how this was burying my idea, how stopping this run on at the appropriate place really meant that I could say more and that I could, that I could see what I was arguing. I mean, I hate to go into this in this way, but it was true that the verb then became more alive. And she never used those terms, but I learned how to express myself in ways and I learned that what I had to say was worth expressing, that these – that when I thought I had nothing, what to say or when I thought that something was dumb even, she would point out what I was actually saying and where I needed to say more. And the value of that, the value of that time with her, felt, you know, like a warm embrace really. She also did all kinds of things. This is true for people I had who are in the program itself. They loved us. It felt like they loved us. I mean she – this is Mina now, she would talk about me as a whole person. She, one summer, one Christmas, gave me a bottle of Miss Dior perfume which I – I mean I don’t even remember why she did that, but she did that. And when I was worried about being interested in reading detective novels, which I still love reading by the way, and how in English department those kinds of – that kind of reading was not valued and not really very smart, she talked about what was smart about that. I mean she didn’t use the word smart, but she just said [00:28:00], this is the analytical part of you. This is what – you

enjoy this, because you are... and she found a way to connect me the person with the things in the world I found interesting and even pointed a way for me to use those things to succeed in school. I mean, this is what I think any really solid, strong professor should be able to do for their students. It takes time and for some reason she had the time.

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White:

The people, people like Mina, people like Barbara and Betty, and a couple of other professors I had, and one other counselor, Charley Russell, and actually because Barbara – and because Betty – when Betty died, Charley Russell took her students. And I don't – I guess, I don't know what to say except that without that support I would not have made it. I would not have been able to continue at City College. I would have failed out, I'm sure.

“Let's not worry about that; here's a way to do your work.”

For the most part there were also a lot of professors who are not in the SEEK program itself who are also just wonderful. I mean Ed Quinn was one of them. He was another person who – you know, I went and you could cut this out, but I need to just say this. I, I was taking a Shakespeare course with him and I was intimidated by the kids who were just, you know, raising their hand before he even finished his question, and I was afraid to talk. And then we had these weekly papers to do and I found myself paralyzed, because I [00:30:00] was feeling as was my – a theme for me. I was feeling not so smart, not as capable as other people. I didn't get to City College as a normal, regular person, you know, a regular student with an 87 average and a Regent's diploma. I didn't have those things. And that was kind of on my shoulder a lot. That's something I had to work through a lot with the counselors and just on my own.

But in any case, Ed Quinn had me in his office telling me how to write these papers that I felt I couldn't write. He would give us like one question about some play, King Lear or something is one I remember. And I went to his office to say “I can't do this” and I talked about what was bothering me about the classroom. And he just said, those kids are used to talking – they, they love hearing themselves. It doesn't mean what they were saying is worth anything. So, let's not worry about that. Here's a way to do your work. And what he suggested, which I still use even now, is to write this paper as if you're writing it, a letter to yourself or to someone and then just go back and take out first

person and there you've got whatever it is you have to say. But that little switching of the audience idea, I took and I – actually I Stigmas, labels, and racism: “There were days that were hard as a result of that.” So I think the experience was: meet with a counselor, talk about how classes are going and maybe we even got our assignments from the counselors. And then it was just functioning on City College campus, but not as a regular student. I mean I think that because there were so few Black students when I went there, anybody – the whole question actually became for many people, are you SEEK [00:32:00] or are you regular? And, while it was fabulous being there, there were some ways in which it was difficult being a SEEK student. What was beautiful about this program is that the counselors were very sensitive to the fact that there was a certain amount of hostility surrounding us, both from professors on campus and also from other students who were suspicious of the number of – we're talking about hundred AND something students out of a huge population. But nevertheless there were ways in which our little program seemed to come with a big loud announcement and I don't quite know how that happened.

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White:

I was in a class with a professor and I actually love this class, even though he was reading from yellowing notes and it was boring on one sense, but the readings were great. There was another Black student in the classroom, who was much lighter than I was, who did come to class late almost every time. So I got back a paper from him. I don't remember the grade, it wasn't a bad grade, but at the bottom of it was, you know: “Please try to make sure you get to class on time.” And I read it and thought, well he doesn't even realize who I am. And so after class I went up to him to say, you know, “Professor Wagner, I'm always on time and I think you have me confused.” And before I could finish he just went ballistic. I mean, I started crying, he started berating me and I wound up running upstairs to the counseling office to talk to Charley Russell about what had happened. And there were professors and also other students, I mean the temperament at City, the – what other kids felt about SEEK students [00:34:00] and the environment that we were in was, you know, positive within the bubble of SEEK, but there were lot of negative things, a lot of – you know, not just hostility from other – from students who thought they got in the right way or the lane that was the one that led to City and they got in appropriately. There were, you know, other Black students who wanted to make sure that people knew they were not SEEK

students. And that probably ran through the whole time that I was there.

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White:

So, I entered City – I have to say that I really did not know what I would major in, I was just glad to be a student there. And I would say the classes I loved most were biology, psychology and I forgot the other. I think there were many sociology classes that I also liked. But I was afraid in my other courses to acknowledge to the person teaching, that maybe I needed to spend some time in the office with office hours getting to understand whatever it was that seemed to be blocking me from doing better in the class, or maybe I was confused when I left a lecture. But I never went – I don't think I ever went to any office hours of any professor, with the exception of the English department people who were all so embracing, with the exception of, you know, maybe one or two of them. And so I wound up majoring in English primarily because of them, and because I could do that work. I didn't, I saw a way to do it and I did like it. And they were, I suppose too, Barbara was so wonderful that I think the [00:36:00] idea of – no, I know the idea of becoming a little Barbara sort of was appealing to me.

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White:

I think that I never really although my experience at SEEK and at City was a good one, I really always felt like I have to sort of cover my shortcomings unless I knew that the person who was wanting – to whom I needed to go for help would be generous and embracing and not ridicule or reject me and so...

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White:

And it is true that at a certain point I did think that I could see Barbara and what she was doing so clearly, and I think my interest in art, in books and in literature anyway, and the way in which the Black Arts Movement was so alive – I mean I was involved in a lot of, a lot of really great, you know, sort of salons I guess they're called, at Larry Neil's house and, you know, I was very involved, so that was a reason I became an English major. It's just those other things would have been useful if I'd been able to stand up and explain to people what I didn't understand and have the faith that they would embrace me and not reject me and say, get out of here, stupid, like my third grade teacher did which is fairly what – I think that was my fear,... so...

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White:

And similar things happened at City in the sense that well these two things coupled my sense of maybe I shouldn't really be here, maybe there is a way that I really am not as smart, maybe there is a way that if you're Black you really can't [00:38:00] think. I mean there was this – and, and you know, because of my personality I would say more than anything. And so the experiences I had with teachers who may have reinforced that negative idea, and they certainly weren't alone at thinking that Black people were not as capable or not as smart. Those things sometimes did make it hard. Those were – there were days that were hard as a result of that.

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White:

And even – I mean as an adult I was not – until very recently, I never acknowledged that I was a SEEK student or that I was in any kind of special program which I don't say proudly, but that is a fact. At Princeton there was a program that we wound up developing to help students acclimate themselves when they came to Princeton, students who quote, you know – 'didn't belong there', but who had been admitted. And I may have talked a little bit about my own experience at City to them to try to help – I was on a committee trying to develop such a program, so...

“Respect for me as a person and a student – that's what the SEEK program gave to me, and probably to everybody there.”

And graduating from City College in Lewisohn Stadium, which I don't think exists anymore, was a powerful, wonderful moment for me.

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White:

It was my grandfather who was most enthusiastic about this. I mean, he is the one who was just constantly there monitoring how I was doing and seeing how things were going.

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White:

So I graduated in 1970. Actually I think technically I probably graduated in '71, because I think there was a paper [00:40:00] that I remember delivering to my – to Mark Merski, who was a poet and a great teacher that I had. That paper was lingering, so I think actually – in any case I graduated and I worked at a couple

of agencies in the city. I was actually enthusiastic about working and I hadn't really thought about graduate school. I was wanting to stay independent. I was determined to not move back home, so I needed to get work. And there was a program that was a – there was a tutoring program that for ESL students and so there came this opportunity for me to direct that program and also go to a Masters program that Mina was putting together in pedagogy at City College.

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White: But in any case, so I – you know, a lot of my life and where I am now actually really started there, it's true, at City. I mean it is a fact. So I taught there for – I don't know, maybe 16 years or so and then Arnold and I moved to Princeton. He, and I managed to get a job there, starting as an associate director running – establishing a writing program there. And so I guess, that there is a way that without the SEEK program, without these opportunities, and without the people and the structure that was in place there, I don't know where I would be in my life. I'm sure – I mean I was a survivor, so I would have done something. But considering that it cost nothing, that we got a stipend of \$15 a day, I think we got all of our meals once this – this is once I'm at the dorm [00:42:00] which was after my first year. We ate in some restaurant on 72nd Street. And so really, that program launched me into the life that I have now, my life.

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White: So – but the main point of what I'm talking about here is that respect for me as a person and a student, that's what the SEEK program gave to me and probably to everybody there. A kind of, here you are, this is how you do it, this is what you need to do yourself to succeed, and this is what I see in you that is valuable. And I will be with you until you get there and that's what I think that program did.

Credits:

Marvina White: An Oral History of the CCNY 1960s SEEK Program
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