

[00:00:00.650] - Niles Harvey
Ah. All right.

[00:00:01.400] - Niles Harvey
I am Niles Harvey, class of 26. We are here in Sewanee Tennessee, with Thomas, and we will begin the interview now. So my first question to you is, are there any major stories or things that you can share with us, basically at your time at sewanee?

[00:00:18.470] - Thomas Burless
Major stories? Like, with me individually?

[00:00:22.010] - Niles Harvey
Yeah.

[00:00:22.290] - Speaker 3
Like, it can be anything.

[00:00:23.480] - Thomas Burless
Anything that stands out to you or of specific memories that made a difference or an impact that your life made for me.

[00:00:29.710] - Niles Harvey
Yeah.

[00:00:30.010] - Speaker 3
I mean, I'm a Posse scholar from DC. You have the Posse Plus retreats and those every year, those always stuck out to me so much. It's like, different topics. Oh, yeah, you're a freshman, so I don't know if you've had it already, but they're really good events. A bunch of people from campus, students, faculty, professors all get together, and you're kind of on the same playing field, like, everybody's just trying to learn. Right. And you take on a topic that's controversial. I remember one year, our topic was, like, us versus them. So it's like a bunch of different demographics, like race, ethnicity, gender, and how we combat those not only in our real lives outside of Sewanee, but also on Sewanee campus and whatnot. So, yeah, those events always were very dear to me because I got to not only meet people that I've never met before, Sewanee which is weird because it's like 1700 people here. So you meet everybody, but see different perspectives and get perspectives from faculty and staff and professors, because normally it's kind of like it's not really a power dynamic, but you can't really speak to them unless you have a good relationship with them, like a certain level.

[00:01:54.260] - Thomas Burless
But there you could just a good camaraderie. We did like, these things called warm and fuzzies at the end, where you just write a note to anybody that made you feel a certain way. During the weekend. I think we had four of them once every year, so those always stuck out to me. Those are some of my fondest memories at Sewanee, even though I didn't take place on Sewanee camp.

[00:02:22.200] - Niles Harvey
Right, but still...

[00:02:23.360] - Speaker 3
like Sewanee people because coming in I'm from DC so it's a big city trying to find your footing. There's nothing out here. I can't do the Uber, I can't.

[00:02:36.010] - Niles Harvey
Do the normal stuff you would do in the city.

[00:02:37.720] - Thomas Burless
Right.

[00:02:38.230] - Niles Harvey
I get you.

[00:02:39.240] - Thomas Burless
So it really helped me to because I was very homesick my first semester, going to the first Posse Plus retreat. It really helped me find more of a place at sewanee with my peers because it was like, big, nice demographic of people. It wasn't just people of color. You had the white students and white professors, people from all genders and whatnot, people from different walks of life just coming together and talking, having conversation, honest, open conversation. People cried, people laughed. It was very vulnerable and very raw. But it was definitely something well needed for sewanee.

[00:03:21.310] - Niles Harvey
That's good.

[00:03:23.870] - Niles Harvey
My next question for you is, like, I know I have my own perspective was, like, to, like, see my first impression of sewanee. What was your first impression?

[00:03:33.110] - Thomas Burless
My first impression, so I think the first time I came down here was during the prospective weekend, like, right before my freshman year. And maybe we just came on a really good weekend or something. But, man, the campus looked incredible because I had heard that 13,000 acres honestly came out of high school. I know what an acre was. I was like, is that a lot? But now I see it is a lot.

[00:04:02.780] - Niles Harvey
Yeah.

[00:04:03.200] - Thomas Burless
And I think the dorm that I was staying in was Hunter, and I had, like, a really good I stayed with one of my good friends, Devonte Turnings, and he showed me, like, a really good time on campus. But it was really cool to be on a college campus because I didn't do too many tours before, Sewanee I didn't really tour any other schools, for real. So seeing this school was, like, insane, because I'm thinking it'd be, like, a lot of big buildings, right. A lot of the campuses, bustling people in the quad or whatnot. But it was more, like, serene. It was, like, springtime. So the sun was out, right. Looking nice. Great weather. Devonte said he took us to man, what is that place called? He took us to Greensview for sure. And then he took us to one of the lakes not the one that's further out, but the one that's closest to the farm.

[00:05:12.020] - Niles Harvey
I know, I think I was trying to talk about I don't know the name of it.

[00:05:14.226] - Thomas Burless
yeah

[00:05:14.280] - Thomas Burless
So it was just, like, very interesting because it was, like, not what I was expecting, college campus to have all this nature and have all this open space. The 13,000 acres is not really, like, the campus. It's, like, everything else that's around 20. So I guess the long answer to a short question is I thought it was very unexpected, but it was very beautiful. And I was happy that I chose this school because I was kind of skeptical at first. Nowhere not super diverse, small. A lot of high schools I'm from are bigger than Sewanee. Yeah, this is not normal. I thought it wasn't normal, but I was, like, kind of skeptical coming in. But once I got here, I was like, okay, I could definitely see myself here. I'm also not big on nature, and now I am. You come here because I did pre as well. So that really just throws you in into it, right? So, yeah, I was like, okay, I can kind of see myself here. People here are cool. It's beautiful. There's more stuff to do than just, like, most college campuses, like bars and all that other stuff. But in the middle of nowhere, we have to make do what we have. So yeah, I was kind of happy.

[00:06:29.000] - Niles Harvey

Okay, so I guess going off of those experiences, obviously different programs that you're part of that really connects you with the campus. My next question, I guess following up to that would be, like, how did your time on campus and the things you were affiliated with, how did that shift or change your first initial impression?

[00:06:51.600] - Thomas Burless

I think definitely coming in as a Posse Scholar helped because you have the other Posse Scholars that are already on campus here to help you and kind of make your transition because we're all from the same area, kind of make your transition here a little bit easier. People to lean on, people to talk to. Our mentor, Ms. Barbara, was incredible, incredible woman. And she was another person that really helped everybody in my Posse, especially me, to transition from DC. To Sewanee. And I really think it just from my first impressions, the people here kind of made everything else growing. Like I said, I was homesick my freshman year. Definitely first semester, a little second semester, but definitely first semester. So it did take a while to get adjusted. But the people here definitely helped me create a stronger impression of Sewanee. Not just like, taking me around and showing me different dorms and different bluffs, the hiking trails cross, all that stuff, but also just like, being people to lean on and whatnot. I talked to some other friends at other schools, and it's like people have their small groups or whatnot, but I kind of feel like especially my time at Sewanee, it was like it felt very community focused.

[00:08:25.680] - Thomas Burless

I had a good amount of friends and colleagues, professors and staff that wanted to actually see me succeed, and me also wanted to reciprocate that feeling towards them. So my impressions of Sewanee never really deteriorated. I mean, obviously there was stuff that happened on campus throughout my four years, like racial stuff or stuff focused around gender. I mean, I've had some pretty not good experiences also in the surrounding areas of Sewanee, but generally the community aspect of Sewanee kind of kept me here, and I feel like kept the campus together. I can give, like, an example. I think my senior year there was, I guess we have what is it called, an honorary degree recipient. That was in the news for a bunch of scandals. So this recipient, his honorary degree had been removed from multiple other universities, like University of North Carolina, I think, like eight other universities. And Sewanee was the only one where we didn't remove the degree or revoke it.

[00:09:59.100] - Niles Harvey

Right.

[00:09:59.410] - Thomas Burless

So our senior year, basically, our senior class got together and we were like, hey, we know how big Sewanee is on tradition. We're going to protest you all not removing this guy's honorary degree because he's doing really bad stuff to women. So we don't want to be associated with that. So we all decided not to wear our gowns to graduation unless they said, hey, let's do some degree.

[00:10:30.510] - Niles Harvey

Yeah.

[00:10:31.020] - Thomas Burless

And I feel like that community that camaraderie definitely like with students is not easy to find on other college campuses. It works because someone is smaller, easier to communicate, but also we all just kind of have a similar mindset. Obviously everybody has different political affiliations and whatnot, but the same mindset to do, like, what is right generally. And us coming together helped to get his degree revoked, and so it worked out in the end. So stuff like that, there will always be bad things that happen on campus. And I don't want to call them scandals, but just awful things. And if your campus can come together as a community and build on that and fight back against that, I think that is really important. That's something that Sewanee has a good amount of integrity and the students help to carry that integrity.

[00:11:30.760] - Niles Harvey

My next question, I guess kind of going off of those experiences, I would say is like really honing more in on the black perspective and being an African American student here, how was that experience? Was it I guess, was it difficult as far as transitioning from maybe seeing like, you go to a university where it's predominantly white, you don't have maybe a lot of black counterparts, and you have to try and being African American, male, trying to navigate those circles. What was that like?

[00:11:59.460] - Thomas Burless

Oh, yeah, I had a little bit of experience. Being in white spaces was like my high school, but it was like nothing like Sewanee. Yeah, I think we put out some stats at some point in my junior year to senior year. I think it was like something 94% of the students identified as white. And I was like, wow, that is a really high percentage.

[00:12:24.520] - Niles Harvey

Right.

[00:12:25.170] - Thomas Burless

I remember me and my freshman roommate Kareem when we probably like a month in, we were like, counting on our fingers how many black students are in our class. And we were like, man, there are not a lot of us here. So it was definitely an adjustment, especially coming from DC, which is very,- you see all kinds of people everywhere. It wasn't always the most comfortable at first because you're trying to especially being like 18,19. I think I came 17. You want to make a good impression not only to the students, but also the professors as well. So you're trying to be somebody that you're not, or at least I was. I have what was it called? A code switching. Yeah, i caught myself doing that, trying to just be more professional, which is just another term for whiteness and especially professors because I don't want them to see me.

[00:13:38.180] - Niles Harvey

As just another black kid.

[00:13:39.360] - Thomas Burless

Right.

[00:13:39.550] - Thomas Burless

Yeah. I'm here on a scholarship. I'm only here for the scholarship type thing. No, I'm really here to learn. I'm trying to do my best. I was trying to do office hours, trying to be in my professor's faces and have them get to know me, which I mean, is a good thing to do. I feel like I was doing it for the wrong reasons. Obviously, I wanted to learn, but also I wanted them to feel like I was more than just known as a black student.

[00:14:03.850] - Niles Harvey

Right.

[00:14:05.100] - Thomas Burless

So talking differently, being in their faces and whatnot and I guess kind of changing my whole demeanor to kind of match up with what I believed whiteness and professionalism was, right. And trying to align myself as closely with that in order to seem more or less, I guess you say black.

[00:14:30.410] - Niles Harvey

Yeah.

[00:14:31.860] - Thomas Burless

And then with students, I was kind of doing the same thing. But also a lot of the students I came in with were actually really cool. Like I said, I did PRE and oh, yeah, that's another thing. I remember when I did PRE, I was the only black kid in my class who did PRE. So I was like, oh, wow, this is how it's really going to be, right?

[00:14:54.460] - Niles Harvey

It's just me.

[00:14:55.570] - Thomas Burless

And then the other funny thing was my PRE dad was, I think, the only author, Claude Cameroonian, but he was the only person of color pre dad as well. So we were in the same family. So it's like it was all into one group. But I was just lucky that my pre family was very cool, allowed me to be myself even the first time I was on Sewanee. Or not the first time, but when I went for registration, I was just walking to Elliot. I just met this guy named Richardson, a cool dude, and we talked the whole way there and that kind of like had me let my guard down a little bit because it didn't seem like he wanted more, like he was fearful of me. Because I'm also talking to white folks on campus where you can see they're more standoffish.

[00:15:50.640] - Niles Harvey

There's a shift, you can tell.

[00:15:51.970] - Thomas Burless

Yeah, you say something a certain way, use a certain words like, oh, man, you can see there. To me, that kind of change. And it may not be like on purpose. It could be maybe they didn't grow up around a lot of black people as well, but Richardson definitely helped me get my take my guard down and show me that I can try to be myself, but also learn from him and learn from everybody else on campus how to be a better version of myself as well. And me and him are still friends to this day, like my first friend on campus. So yeah, it was like transitioning from a place like DC and coming to a place like sewanee as a black male, it's not easy. I was just thinking about this on my way over. It's like, you could be here for four years and you will never get used to being in an all white or a majority white space.

[00:16:47.070] - Niles Harvey

Yes.

[00:16:48.960] - Thomas Burless

It's so hard to get used to, especially when you go back home and you're back in an all black or a mixed space.

[00:16:56.580] - Niles Harvey

Right.

[00:16:58.340] - Thomas Burless

It's like a shift that goes over you.

[00:17:00.920] - Niles Harvey

Yeah, no, I definitely know what you mean, because speaking to that, I've had my experiences where times where I will maybe get the rare chance to go off campus, rare cases I do get to go off campus. You kind of go from since you're at Sewanee, you feel like you're in a bubble, you're in closed, and then we step out of that and you realize, whoa, there's all this stuff that maybe I may have been previously around or things that you kind of recognize you're like, okay, there's a world outside of Sewanee. So I think that's one thing. As far as doing a black city for me right now, that's one of the things that I kind of have to realize, is, like, there's Sewanee and then there's outside of Sewanee. But I guess going back to you. So you would say that your overall experience here was really trying to would you say it was like trying to connect with your blackness, in which, I mean, you obviously probably had that before you came here, but then coming here, there was maybe a shift and you maybe might have lost a little bit of a connection with it.

[00:17:55.860] - Niles Harvey

So would you say that maybe your journey here was kind of reconnecting with that African American experience?

[00:18:01.630] - Thomas Burless

Yeah, definitely. Which is weird to say because it's like a majority white space. But I remember in high

school, I had a decent sense of self, obviously still young, but I remember I was not a big fan of Black Lives Matter, because I think that's around the time when Trayvon Martin that whole case, I think that was my senior year in high school. And that was really I mean, Black Lives Matter had been around for a while, but that was really when they took prominence. And I was not a fan of the name, which a lot of people say, like, oh, I was like, Why all Lives Matter? I was in that type of mindset. And coming to Sewanee like I said, I kind of perpetuated those beliefs a little more, not only because I thought that was what was right, but also, like, being within these white spaces where they're kind of saying the same thing. And I'm trying to not be too volatile, I guess, not try to shake things up too much. That that posse plus retreat I mentioned earlier that definitely changed my perspective. I got to see more perspectives from other people of color about everything that happens in the world.

[00:19:17.790] - Thomas Burless

Obviously, I had my friends in high school. You can argue with them and whatnot, but meeting people who you don't know that well, who are having this perspective that look like you, it really helped me change and I guess radicalize a little bit. And my whole perspective on the movement has completely shifted.

[00:19:40.260] - Niles Harvey

Right

[00:19:40.520] - Speaker 3

And I understood why I was called Black Lives Matter and I also understood my blackness and the power in my blackness as well, but also the danger that comes with it. And I definitely have been in various situations more around Sewanee's campus. Not really me personally on Sewanee campus facing racial and prejudice, but definitely around Sewanee's campus where my blackness was basically a threat to me.

[00:20:09.680] - Niles Harvey

Right.

[00:20:16.020] - Thomas Burless

It's difficult to navigate, but having especially the students that here at Sewanee are, I feel like, very special and they also have a good sense of self and they like I said, it helped radicalize me and help me see blackness in a way that I hadn't before. So I was really more like on some everybody should love everybody type thing, which everybody should, but there are levels to it, and a lot of the students here helped me see that. And not just black students.

[00:20:52.540] - Niles Harvey

Not all.

[00:20:53.100] - Thomas Burless

Students, but a decent amount of them. I was just talking to my friend about our first Posse plus experience and I was in a group with a professor. We were doing religious groups like grouping based on religion. And at the time I was an atheist, I was in the group with atheists and whatnot. And one of the professors had told me that being an atheist is like the closest he's felt to being black. And at the time I was like, yeah, I mean, that makes sense. Like an outlier or you looked at this a certain way because of a demographic that you're in. But my good friend Bethany, it was also my posse a white woman. She pulled me to the side and was like, I can't believe he just said that to you. And I was like, what do you mean? He's like, he just compared religion, which is more or less a choice, to you being black, which is not a choice, and very dangerous to you, and that's not okay. And I was like, man, I didn't even think about that at the time when I was like, white professor, I'm not trying to press them out or anything, but also it didn't even click in my mind until she said something to me about that, that you can't really compare anything to blackness.

[00:22:12.340] - Thomas Burless

We don't have a choice in our skin color. And people see you a certain way for something that you don't have a choice over. So a lot of people have a lot to teach me my freshman year, which I'm very

grateful for, I guess.

[00:22:29.530] - Niles Harvey

Speaking to those learning moments and teaching moments and lessons, are there people, professors or maybe friends that made your life at Sewanee pivotal or just really important or memorable? From the standpoint, I was able to be myself and understand maybe more so my purpose here at the university.

[00:22:50.420] - Thomas Burless

Yeah, a lot of professors and staff, I mean, definitely miss Barbara Banks. Honestly, Kenny, I think she was the dean of students, but she was also my posse mentor, so that's kind of what the main focus I had with her. But she was one of the main people that kind of made my life at Sewanee so much better. But she did that for a lot of students here. She is like a legend, but yeah, just always having her door open, able to talk to about any issues, anything happening to me on campus, if I'm not doing well in the class or I'm having trouble with a relationship, anything I needed to. She was always there for me. And I am eternally grateful to her for that. Because, honestly, without some of her guidance, I don't even know if I would have made it through someone. My freshman year was very hard for a plethora of reasons, both personal but in academic and adjusting. And she stuck by me throughout the entire process. And it's like one of my best friends. It's weird to say about like, a staffing, but yeah, professor. Professor Johnson. Even though I never took a biology class, she calls me Thomas and Tarantula because we just had an interaction my freshman year where I saw a tarantula and she said it wasn't there, but I swear it was there.

[00:24:22.080] - Thomas Burless

Every time we see it, she calls me Thomas A. Tarantula. We just have a conversation. It's like some slight like, that is really cool. I didn't think you could have a relationship with that like that with the staff member or professor, where you just talk to them, just like as a peer, and you just have funny conversations. You laugh, you hug, and you go your separate ways. That was also really important for me to have, because you have that with your friends, but having them with staff members is really cool. Professor Lucia Dell in the computer science department. I don't know if she's still here, but I took a few classes with her, and Computer Science was a hard subject for me, why I chose a minor in it, but she really helped me along the way and also, like, open door policy. And she was very good at doing not giving you the answer, but also leading you to the right answer. So I don't think I would have been through computer science, all those courses without her. And I was always afraid to take her class because everybody before me was like, yeah, she's a hard professor.

[00:25:33.020] - Thomas Burless

Her tests are hard, she's really strict, she's mean, and she's like the nicest lady who's cool as hell, she'll help you out. Yeah, the classes are hard and coding is hard, but she made it so it's like bearable and easy to understand, easy to digest. Mr. Benjamin. Even though I always wish that I had a strong relationship with Mr. Benjamin, but I was always in Miss Barbara's office instead of Mr. B's. But towards my latter years of Sewanee, my nephew started talking to him more and learning more about his history with Sewanee and all the black students that he recruited and the impact that he had on Sewanee. And that phrases that mixed along with the Roberson Project, it kind of showed me that Sewanee has changed from when it was incorporated, like, when it started a lot, and it's going in a good direction. Benjamin was the Director of Multicultural Affairs for so many years, and he's done so much for not only black students, but just like, all students. Like, I was just talking to Jaime, I think he's class of 07' who is the founder of HOLA, and Mr. Benjamin was the one that pushed him.

[00:27:08.210] - Niles Harvey

To do it right.

[00:27:09.530] - Speaker 3

So it's like he had such an impact not only on the campus, but on the students as an individual. So definitely him, for sure. Professor Or Karen Proctor and Professor Courtney Thompson, two of my favorite ladies on campus, women on campus. Just being in their office and getting guidance from them because they were some of the professors that they see their black students as black students.

Some freshers. Just you see all your students as students, you want to help them out when you can, but they recognize, like, I have resources for you and I will help you out, and I know you're going to do great. But also I recognize being black person on campus, it can be very hard. It can be hard to find those resources or you don't even know what yeah. So I want to help you find those and put you in places and positions for you to be great. So Professor Proctor has definitely introduced me to multiple people outside of Sewanee, various organizations and whatnot to help me expand on, like, my career and professor Thompson. I took Black Masculinity with her, and just being in her office, that really like, wow, that class is crazy.

[00:28:36.340] - Thomas Burless

That really helped me understand myself as a black man more and just talking to her and getting her background, her experience, and her giving me advice and whatnot really helped shape my senior year and kind of post grad as well. I was afraid to talk to a lot of professors about deeper stuff outside, like academics or whatnot. My freshman year, like I said, I was really there to be in their face and show them I was more than just, like, a black student. But as I grew older, I realized that these professors can be here just to be, like, a general resource to me or staff members, and a lot of them want to. It's a really good community here at Sewanee. So, yeah, like, yeah, there are a lot of professors and staff members who have helped me and kept me here and helped a lot of my friends recruited other people. So, yeah, I'm very grateful for the staff. Professor Elrod, he was like one of my economics teachers, man. I was struggling in microeconomics, and he would just make it so easy, and he was so chill and so cool and man, I'm going down memory lane now.

[00:29:59.070] - Niles Harvey

No, that's what it's for. And like I said, keep go as long as you want.

[00:30:05.600] - Niles Harvey

Me. Personally, I'm glad I'm getting to hear that you had so many positive experiences with professors. It's definitely something that I want to be able to have as well. I mean, I already have that with Ms. Johnson Ray. She's been awesome. She's helped me with a lot of stuff. And she talked to my parents when I came here for registration, met my parents, talked to them. And I remember my dad and my mom, they're like, there's this woman in the biology department you need to go and speak to. She's going to be expecting you to come by. If you don't come by, we're going to give you a call. So I stopped by. I went to her office and spoke to her. And she's my boss for work study, but she's acting kind of almost like a second mom because she's there. She's like, never need to come in and talk and come and talk and sit down. But she has her particular ways about how she wants things done. But no, that's good. So my next thing is one point of interest I kind of wanted to talk about was I noticed you were talking about the black masculinity class, Professor Thompson, and how that was really impactful.

[00:31:14.970] - Niles Harvey

Could you maybe, like, talk about that. A little bit more?

[00:31:16.850] - Thomas Burless

Yeah, because I took that class my senior year. After this, I'm out. I got to go into the real world, because Sewanee is like a microcosm of the real world. Most jobs you go into, they're going to look kind of similar to how Sewanee does demographic wise. Yeah, but yeah, that black masculinity class. There were a lot of people in there, but Professor Thompson, she gave us weekly assignments, which helped out a lot. And Professor Thompson is not like she's not going to let you slide on stuff. She going grades just strictly so I struggled in the class at first because we had these writing prompts, and I thought she said, just answer the questions. So I'm answering with one, two sentences, you know, trying to, like, get by and whatnot. I'm getting, like, two out of ten, four out of tens. I'm like, I thought I answered correctly.

[00:32:26.060] - Niles Harvey

Right?

[00:32:26.790] - Thomas Burless

No, you need to write more. I started seeing what other people are writing, and it's like paragraphs. So I say all this to say that that really started me looking at my black masculinity, but also how the black men that we were reading about were portrayed as well, because it forced me to go more in depth about what we're reading. What does black masculinity look like, and why is it currently looking a certain way? I think her syllabus actually had a picture on it, and it was like, the same guy, but on one side, it was him kind of shirtless with a tank top, tattoos, durag, all that. And on the other side, it was him in a suit. It was like, why it didn't say this, but in my mind, looking back, it's like, why is black masculine seen more as the picture on the left with him as tattoos, and he's ganged up and whatnot, and not really what's on the right where he could be, like, a lawyer or professional member.

[00:33:40.170] - Niles Harvey
Right.

[00:33:41.180] - Thomas Burless
Why do we view black men as unprofessional? A danger maybe won't make it to real work or, like, a job going to jail. Statistics do show that black men are the least employed, heavily incarcerated, but a lot of that comes from already implicit bias. Like, people always bring up the whole black people commit 50% of the crime. That 13% of the population. One, that shit is from, like, 1990.

[00:34:24.970] - Niles Harvey
Exactly.

[00:34:25.370] - Thomas Burless
The awful stat. But two, it's also inaccurate. It's like, those people didn't even go to jail. They're arrested for those crimes, but they're arrested due to a lot to implicit bias and people's already preconceived notions.

[00:34:39.060] - Niles Harvey
Right.

[00:34:39.490] - Thomas Burless
And that is a lot how people view black men. You can ask you can ask, like, younger white students, too. Yeah, no, I've been around black people. If you see a black man walking down or a group of black men walking down the street, are you going across the street? What are your thoughts going through your mind?

[00:35:00.010] - Niles Harvey
Right.

[00:35:00.260] - Thomas Burless
As opposed to seeing a group of white guys on the street

[00:35:01.410] - Niles Harvey
White guys, right

[00:35:05.460] - Speaker 3
Honestly, in my mind, even before that class, like I said, I was becoming more and more radicalized in my blackness, but I still had implicit bias in me as well. I mean, I've had terrible experiences with black people, too. I've been robbed because I'm not from the best neighborhood, so I've gone through those experiences as well. So it's hard to be like it's wrong, but at the same time, you got to have a little bit of skepticism. Give me a little bit of the benefit of the doubt that I'm not this, like, what did Hillary call this? A super predator.

[00:35:41.420] - Niles Harvey
Yeah, like the general stereotype. Like, I can be identified as something else than what you think.

[00:35:47.000] - Thomas Burless

Yeah, that class really showed, like, a wide range of black men and what we can do for the black community, but also how we are perceived by every other community. I remember one of the lessons that we had was about privilege, black male privilege. And it was a very hot topic in class because you don't really hear black male and privilege going. But it was very thought provoking to me because it was, like, on the opposite side of black men are kind of at the bottom of the totem pole, but then you have black women who are even lower on the totem pole than we are so in our own community, we can have privilege over those women. And half the size is like, how do we have privilege? We can't use it in society. It's like, we can't, but we can use it within our community. So that's another thing that helped me look at being a black male morph. I'm like, I never even thought about that. I should take more stock in how I treat the black women in my life. Obviously how I just treat women in general, especially like black women, because I can have privilege and power over them within my own community.

[00:37:23.000] - Thomas Burless

So I need to do what I can not only to lift up black men, but also black women as well and take a more intersectional approach as opposed to like, black people can rise together. It's like you lift as you climb, but at the same time in society, black women will kind of have it worse. So we have to do our part as well within our community to not make life worse for them as well. So, yeah, taking that class really opened up a lot of thoughts about my own masculinity and how it ties in with blackness.

[00:38:05.550] - Niles Harvey

Well, my last question is it's really just to kind of talk about anything you want as far as any other stories or memories that you might have? Like I said, they're kind of on the previous question, but just that made any sort of impact or that you go to and it's your first thought is like, this is what made sewanee.

[00:38:30.440] - Thomas Burless

Trying to rack my brain for.

[00:38:32.150] - Niles Harvey

Yeah, no, I'm going to take your time.

[00:38:33.470] - Thomas Burless

Some of the more specific instances take your time. I don't know. You talk about the sewanee community. Yeah, I don't know. I had a lot of experiences at sewanee, but I don't know which one the instance I talked about with my class coming together.

[00:39:23.540] - Niles Harvey

Yes.

[00:39:24.370] - Thomas Burless

That definitely screams sewanee to me. Like us coming together as like a community to protest and get stuff changed.

[00:39:33.570] - Niles Harvey

Yeah.

[00:39:33.950] - Niles Harvey

And it doesn't necessarily have to be like a holistic representative. It could be something like personal, too. If it's like a memory that stood out that made sewanee for you, then that's fine too. It doesn't have to be holistic. It's oriented towards you as well. So anything is fair game.

[00:39:53.110] - Niles Harvey

Okay

[00:39:57.520] - Speaker 3

Mean, my freshman year, another thing that really helped me a lot was my dorm. So I stayed in Smith.

And I think my freshman year, that was like the second year Smith was even a thing. It's not like Ayres or St. Lukes, but it was nice. So I got lucky. Everybody's like, oh, you're in Smith. Oh, man. But I remember my hall on Smith. We were all so close. Like, we were all so cool. It was it really, like, gave me like, that whole, like, college, like, what you see in the media and whatnot experience. My roommate, Kareem. Great guy. We end up being roommates all four years and he's still like one of my closest friends, our friends next door, kid Alexandra, man, honestly, Smith as a whole, like, our whole dorm was all pretty, pretty close. That's good. Like we we had a good sense of community within the dorm. Our AP's and Proctors were all super cool. They obviously laid down the law and whatnot, but we partied with them, we drank with them, and we could also go to and talk to them about issues that we were having. But yeah, definitely.

[00:41:35.970] - Thomas Burless

Like my hallway, we were kind of like the turn up hallway. Other people from other places Smith would come down and come to our rooms. We kind of had not an open door policy. Go knock on the door. Sometimes people didn't even knock it. It was like, look what's happening. Sometimes we have people just in our room playing our game or we were gone, or it was a friend's game. But it felt really really nice and it definitely helped me with the whole homesickness. I mean, obviously, fall break, I had to go back Thanksgiving. I was so excited to go back home, but I was also looking forward to coming back and being with those friends again. And for some reason, freshman year felt longer than any other year. I'm not sure why, but I still remember the end when we were all moving out. And we're really sad that we're all going to be living in new dorms like next year because sophomore, you're a freshman, so you'll find this out. But sophomore year, you're kind of at the bottom of the totem pole when it comes to picking dorms because you can't be gown yet.

[00:42:59.740] - Thomas Burless

Obviously seniors, seniority takes precedent, so a lot of people get they call shipped out to like Gorgas or some of the dorm out there. Quintard or trez? So moving away, it was pretty sad. But yeah, definitely. Being in Smith was very good for me. Like my mental health, I didn't really take advantage of the counseling services here at sewanee. They're really good. And sometimes it's depressing being up here because in the middle of nowhere. I would definitely suggest, especially with black students, definitely try to get off campus at least a few times a semester, like Chattanooga, Nashville, even though it's kind of far. Yeah, I feel like that would definitely help with mental health and also help you meet people, different clubs to different events. I know I went to Atlanta one time with one club and that was very nice. I'm getting off. I was rambling.

[00:44:08.540] - Niles Harvey

No, you're good. That's why we're having this interview, so you can expand on topics like that. So no, this is great.

[00:44:15.090] - Thomas Burless

Okay. Yeah. I definitely very much suggest that students get off campus. It's nice having all the nature and then the bluffs and the heights. That's really nice. And that's also very beneficial for people. But I feel especially as, like, black students. We need to be around more black people.

[00:44:37.570] - Niles Harvey

Right.

[00:44:38.280] - Thomas Burless

Just to have a sense of comfort. Even if you're cool with the white people on campus.

[00:44:42.620] - Niles Harvey

Yeah.

[00:44:42.960] - Niles Harvey

Sense of community, sense of self, where you like to feel like, okay, I know my homeboy is going to be here. I can go to certain people and be like, all right, I'm cool. I can take off the armor.

[00:44:52.610] - Thomas Burless
Yeah.

[00:44:53.370] - Thomas Burless
So I definitely feel like Chattanooga, Nashville, Memphis. Like, those are all just traveling as far as you need to.

[00:45:02.950] - Niles Harvey
There's some way to get off campus.

[00:45:04.700] - Speaker 3
Yeah. It'll be very beneficial to your mental health. And also, if you're not from Tennessee, there are cool places to visit. Get some Tennessee history. I mean, the KKK originally not too far away from me. Oh, that's another experience I could talk about.

[00:45:20.790] - Niles Harvey
Yes, please.

[00:45:22.200] - Thomas Burless
Like, Charlottesville happened during my time, 2017. And I remember there was another white supremacist rally that was happening in Shelbyville, which is like, an hour 15 away from here. So, man, a good amount of us were like, we are about to go counterprotest this because we're not about to stand for these white supremacists taking over like, no.

[00:45:47.790] - Thomas Burless
And when the protest, what are they even protesting? Why are they upset? Right, but a bunch of us went to counter protest. That's another way we show community for just America in general. This is bad, but it's very threatening to us as black people as well. So we're not going to stand for that. So, yeah, a bunch of us went up to Shelby Road to protest, and we had to wait in line just to get in because there were a bunch of people already up there ready to kind of protest, which was a good site. Yeah, that's a good sign.

[00:46:22.140] - Niles Harvey
Yeah, that's a good sign.

[00:46:22.990] - Thomas Burless
And I think only one there was only one white nationalist there, and he didn't really do anything. I just did there. But there was another white nationalist rally. I forget the city, but another part of Tennessee that another group of Sewanee students went up and counter protested that. And it was like a bigger rally. I think it got a little bit violent, but not anything too crazy. So we were kind of concerned for their safety. But that was definitely an interesting time because, man, obviously it sparked a whole bunch of conversations. I actually got to speak about my experience on a panel at Sewanee, which is good, because Sewanee is giving us a space to vent out our frustrations, but also try to educate people who may not be knowledgeable on the situation white nationalism and how that not only is a threat to people of color, but just the country in general. They're essentially terrorists, in my opinion.

[00:47:24.390] - Niles Harvey
Yeah.

[00:47:24.910] - Thomas Burless
But try to educate people who either don't know or who don't want to know. So, yeah, that was a really interesting experience. I've had a lot of interesting experiences with either with white people not affiliated with Sewanee, but near Sewanee. Like when Trump won, we had the Trump train. I don't know if you heard about that.

[00:47:53.050] - Niles Harvey
No.

[00:47:53.980] - Speaker 3

Yeah, it was like a caravan that just went through our campus all the way to downtown Sewanee. Just trump signs, beating horns. But students came out and we were like, I mean, obviously Trump won. Nothing we could do about it in 2020. But we came out and kind of like, kind of protested that as well. We haven't made our signs. The Black Lives matter. You can't counter protest what they were doing, but just to show that we are not okay with Trump winning, that was like a dark day for Sewanee. My partner at the time came to my room and cried based on the election results because I worked at clurg. So during that time, I was just getting updates from staff because you can't be on your phone, man. I think some professors canceled class. It was good to come together as a community. As to why, obviously there are Trump people voted for Trump here, Trump supporters. But it was good to see a lot of people come together and kind of counter protesting that and speaking up and making our voices heard. That's one thing Sewanee students will do. They want to find a way to make their voices heard somewhere.

[00:49:17.360] - Speaker 3

I'm rambling, talking like shit, but I was not good at speaking, especially public speaking before I came to Sewanee or even like making my voice heard and talking about freshman year, I would not have done a panel on that. I probably would have went, well, I don't even know if I would have went, but if I had went, I definitely wouldn't have spoken out on it because I didn't feel knowledgeable enough to speak out. I didn't feel like my voice mattered. But meeting people here, especially the professors and staff I talked about and the students, they definitely show that. Yeah, obviously it does matters. A lot of experiences like that that help me really see that I am black. But I have a place in this world, my voice has a place in this world that matters, and people want to hear it. And I also have two ears too. That means I have people to listen to. And I hope I can continue to do that and continue to find people who can educate me and have conversations and whatnot same as what I've learned and had here at sewanee.

[00:50:22.600] - Thomas Burless

It's good to hear. It's always good to hear things like that and stories like that, because I just think as a student now, that kind of keeps things in perspective for me. And obviously what there is to experience, what you can deal with, and kind of being more self aware, which obviously as a young African American student, being a freshman, that's something I desperately need. So it's good to hear the experiences. But next, is there anything else that you'd like to share? Talk about is not all good.

[00:50:52.480] - Thomas Burless

Yeah, I think I don't even know what time is. I really haven't been talking.

[00:50:56.740] - Niles Harvey

Look whole point of this is to talk and get your experience and understand the black perspective and that's why we're doing this.

[00:51:09.480] - Thomas Burless

I think I've said everything that I need to. I mean, just like I said, find your community here on campus. As black people, we should try to stick together, but that does not mean you should ignore or try not to be friends with anybody else on campus. Like go to other events acasa I'm blanking on the Asian Polynesian Asian Association, but try to go to other events and support the other demographics on campus as well. Have friends from everywhere. Because once you leave here, you need to know how to speak to white people. You need to know how to do it in a way where you're still being yourself and you're being genuine. Like you don't have to code switch or I mean, I've learned in the workplace too, about how professionalism and all that, it's just like a microcosm of whiteness and how and white supremacy. But you do have to also understand that they have a level of comfortability with black people as well that they may not be too comfortable with. So not saying you have to make them feel more comfortable, but also there's a sense of respect, mutual respect you should have with everybody you meet.

[00:52:44.290] - Thomas Burless

So I think it's important to have different people, like friends from different backgrounds or whatnot. Obviously get off campus as much as you can. Definitely take advantage of the mental health services here because they're really good. Join clubs or Greek life and find community there as well and take in the nature s y and you already have. Ms. Johnson definitely, like, make relationships with staff members and faculty that will last you a lifetime. A lot of students don't take advantage of the staff in that capacity, and some staff don't allow students to really take advantage of themselves in that capacity. So find that area that you can work in. Yeah, it's not easy being a black student at Sewanee, and you'll never get used to being like an all white space like this, but there are ways to make it easier. Bearable and Sewanee is a fun place. It can be a fun place. They say it is what you make it, but yeah, it can definitely be a place where you can grow and thrive and come out a lot better than when you went in.

[00:54:12.280] - Niles Harvey

That's all. I just like to thank you for your time, obviously, and everything that you've shared has been beneficial. I know for me it's been very beneficial. Like I said, just getting to hear a different perspective and getting to just broaden my horizon is always needed.

[00:54:30.300] - Thomas Burless

Thank you. Thank you. For putting on this, because I don't think we had this last year. We definitely didn't have something like this when I was a student. So just hearing being able to hear alumni, like previous students experience, helping that shape your experience or anybody else, and learning from you as well, it's really important and it's really good. So I really thank you for putting this kind of thing on.

[00:54:54.250] - Niles Harvey

Absolutely.