

[00:00:00.650] - Niles

Hello, I'm Niles Harvey, class of 26, and I'm here with Brandon Treaks. We're going to start this interview today. So my first question for you kind of coming in as being a Sewanee student is like, could you share any stories that kind of stood out to you while you as your time here as a student?

[00:00:22.210] - Brandon

Yeah, I mean, I was very involved in admissions office at Fulford. As a tour guide, I had opportunity to meet a lot of students during those periods of time. And I'm also a posse. Scholar recipient. So one time where I was doing a tour and I guess I have some students well, it was definitely students that I met previously, but I didn't know that they remembered me. And they was like, oh, when they finally came on campus, hey, you gave me my tour. You're the reason why I came onto campus, and stuff like that. And we talked, chopped it up. And I say it just remind me of the power, just one representation, but also being able to connect with students or just people in general and sharing your story and your outlook or perspective on things. So that was like one meaningful experience. And then also, I guess being a part of the African American Alliance, we did a couple of protests for Black Lives Matter where we did we kneeled during the football game and he's on this one, purple for a page and whatnot caused a lot of discussion and discourse.

[00:01:45.310] - Niles

Right.

[00:01:45.890] - Brandon

Because it was pretty controversial for the kneeling National Anthem I was part of so much. But I would say really, just being able to utilize my voice, support my peers and encouraging them to use their voice and just being a support my peers and the new people that would meet on campus eventually got you.

[00:02:18.040] - Niles

So I guess going along, things that you kind of talked about, how did you feel your voice was heard, or do you feel like it was heard or what was your kind of thoughts on representation, like, throughout the campus during your time here?

[00:02:31.250] - Brandon

Yeah, I would say my voice was heard. Thankfully. I had people on staff and administration that I built rapport with, so that was really helpful and it was just a lot of lessons. Like the whole thing of character.

[00:02:57.430] - Niles

People.

[00:02:57.960] - Brandon

Always want to talk about you, but when you have a great character, people are willing to go to bat for you behind closed doors. People advocate for you without you even on. So I think that was really helpful for me personally, but it was times where peers on campus, their voices weren't heard, and I was like troubling, whether it's like a black woman or woman in general with issues of sexual assault, party culture, et cetera, amongst other things. So it was like eye opening and it made me realize some of the privileges that I do have and how I could utilize those to work with other people and get a better understanding challenge for myself, too.

[00:03:47.990] - Niles

Got you. So my next question, I guess, kind of going into that is, what were your first impressions when you came to Sewanee? Like, if you visited or seeing a campus for the first time, what do you think?

[00:03:57.520] - Brandon

I was like, Damn, there's a lot of white people from DC. Black, I went to all black schools, you know what I'm saying?

[00:04:03.760] - Niles
Right.

[00:04:05.710] - Brandon

So I was like, Damn, me in nature. But I always was a fan of nature, the environment, and I was really excited because for me, DC during that time, I needed to get away. So this is like a second chance, if you will, for me to be productive for myself. I'm supposed to be back home, and I was getting into trouble not being as productive. So that's how I looked at it. It's like, man, this is like my place. I have a roof over my head. I have an opportunity to make some friends and already have my friends here being in policy, already have, like, nine other people and then 30 other people that I already knew since I could tie with through my scholarship. So I just try and find a way to get involved as much as possible to keep myself busy, to not think about things that I was struggling with back at home, family issues, but also to connect with other people on campus. So it was like, despite the lack of racial diversity, I knew it was an issue, but I saw for me, it was a bigger thing for me.

[00:05:16.010] - Brandon

And then, frankly, I had, like, professors on campus that really connected with one of them being my first year professor, Kevin Wilson. Took English one on one with him. I thought I was going to fail that job because my high school didn't really prepare me for college as much. I took advantage placement courses.

[00:05:34.950] - Niles
Right.

[00:05:35.340] - Brandon

But I was like it was still, like, a lot of growing to do.

[00:05:38.320] - Niles
Absolutely.

[00:05:38.980] - Brandon

So just going to his office hours and connecting with him connected over Batman. Yeah batman, rap that was it so that really helped. And he was very supportive and connecting with other professors. Dr. Courtney Thompson, Dr. Cyd Brown. Just plenty of them. Dr. Jordan choice. That was really helpful, I guess.

[00:06:07.810] - Niles

I think one of the things for me, like, being African American, sitting here is really trying to find a group that you feel like you can be a part of. And you're mentioning how, since it's so many, it's an overly white population here. My question to you is how did you kind of navigate that space and deal with that? And I know you said you had your friends and groups of people that you already knew prior to university because your scholarship, but how did you navigate really that overall white presence here at school?

[00:06:34.240] - Brandon

Yeah, I would say just joining BIPOC groups, being part of showing up and talking to them, kicking it with them. And then Gamma, Sigma Phi and PST. They had spaces I felt comfortable and good. It was nice to be around. And then eventually, through inspiration and motivation, through other friends, my peers that were older than me or like, junior seniors motivated me to start new things or take the initiative for things. A couple of friends and I, we ended up doing attempting to bring Omega Five Attorney Incorporated on campus. And that's when I was like, okay, this is like, just a stepping stone. It's major for me, that's a stepping stone to spark inspiration for other people, to bring organizations or things campus, whether it's Greek lunch or anything you can do it, like, figure out avenues, people that you can connect with, talk to, and they go, oh, yeah, I support you with this. So doing that, it really helped get me out there because I wasn't a party person, you know what I'm saying? I was doing some chill stuff, you know what I mean? I'll go to any events, community service events.

[00:07:55.100] - Brandon

I'll go to, like, a kickback or something that's on campus. I'll be cool because I didn't really drink too much. I was just more focused on making meaningful connections. So once I joined the fraternity, it allowed me to be more in the social life. I didn't feel the pressure, thankfully, because by the time that was, like, my junior year in college, so the Homies already know how I am, so I didn't know peer pressure. They were like, oh, yeah, Brandon showed up to the Potter, alright bet. And then I enjoy myself meeting new people and just navigating through those spaces. And then it was some white spaces. Like I joined philosophy club. Very interested in philosophy. I major in psychology, so that was very white. But we talked about things that transcend race. It was just really good. Just join different clubs, poetry club, and just seeing other people. And it really stretched my consciousness and understanding of how people, different people from different cultures operate. So that's when I got more comfortable. I was just involved, very involved in multiple leadership roles. That was just like my outlet. I was just trying to get in where I fit in.

[00:09:14.690] - Brandon

I had a purpose, you know what I'm saying? Purpose was to help people and connect and make people who coming in make their transition be smoother than what it.

[00:09:24.310] - Niles

Was for me, right?

[00:09:26.150] - Brandon

Because I came in for a different type of mindset, and I had my struggle. At one point, I was like, Man, I don't want to be here no more. It's like, a lot of stressors, whether it's, like, relationships on campus not doing as well as I thought it would be. I did really well my first semester of freshman or first year and second semester. And in my sophomore year, I struggled a lot. So I was like, Dang, am I supposed to be here. I don't think I'm that good. There's people that's not even studying for that many hours and they're getting 90s A's and all of that, right? I've been studying but I just can't get it. And I'm in like C's and DS and I just had to remind myself I'm running my own race. I can't compare myself. It's all about my personal development.

[00:10:18.070] - Niles

I guess I wanted to kind of touch on the academic piece too because I would say it's a shared similarity, but it's from the standpoint of doing a certain amount of work, trying to get to a certain point in your life, especially here at the university. I guess my question to you is do you feel like there are a lot of head games played when you were here? As far as I mean by that is academically, did you have maybe your white counterparts make you think maybe you're not the right fit for academic spaces or maybe you should consider maybe doing something else that was outside of your major. Do you have ever had any experiences like that?

[00:10:54.870] - Brandon

None of my major, but it was some white counterparts. That because I have a different perspective. They probably try to invalidate my perspective or to be dismissive of it. But I was like, man, I ain't going to let you play me like that. So I never confronted them. I was like, you gon' see, I'm going to just keep doing my own thing. And another thing that was really grateful about having my group, the community people, we just go talk and fan this person was big tripping,

[00:11:30.250] - Niles

right

[00:11:31.470] - Brandon

Why they say that? How are they moving like this? And then thankfully I had professors who witnessed it or call it out or I could talk to them. I felt comfortable talking to them about it, whether it would happen in their class or in another professor class. I was like, hey, man, this happened stuff. I was just thankful to be able to have access to people that was willing to listen because this is like one of them things like, man, the black experience is so on. There's no single definite experience of the

black experience. Yeah, absolutely. Sometimes it's just like if you know a certain group of people, some people, like some professors retire, some professors leave, and those probably be key people that really help the experience.

[00:12:23.340] - Brandon

Like Mr. B and Ms. Barbara. You know what I'm saying? Those like, my godparents, I will always go to their office, chop it up with them. If they were the amber, oh, man, my sewanee experience would have been different. And those are just two people. So it's just like, man, it really depends on the relationships you have. I'm humbled and grateful that I had people like that because I'm in alumni from 87, completely different era, bro. It is just different.

[00:13:02.330] - Niles

Okay, so I guess joined with like obviously those connections that you made, did that help you change your perspective or shift your perspective from your first impressions when you came to university as far as going from obviously your freshman year all the way to senior year?

[00:13:17.360] - Brandon

Yeah, I was like, Man, I'm willing to try more because I was just like, I'm from DC. I'm used to buildings everywhere, catching the train, the metro and stuff like that. I was a fan of nature already, but I was more open to coming out here, and I had a greater appreciation of stargazing, looking at the stars, utilizing what was available on campus, doing outreach trips. That was another thing that really shifted my perspective. I went on outreach trips all four years, and I was encouraged by one of my friends. I was like, I like community service, but I don't know about I could just go back home instead of just doing that. But then I was like, I'll get more out of it if I do like something else, and I could go somewhere else, experience different cultures. So just finding ways to get myself involved and being willing to get involved and having a sense of humility with dignity, you know what I'm saying, to be like, I could try something new if I like it. If I want to, I can continue with it. If I don't like it, at least I try.

[00:14:22.690] - Niles

so you know what you like, right?

[00:14:24.200] - Brandon

Yeah. So that's what really helped me out and working with different people from different communities on campus because I have friends that was, like, in leadership roles for Ola Adelante Acasa. Yeah, I'll just pull up, show up early, like 3015 minutes early. I need some help setting up, get to build rapport with them, and I get to learn more about their culture and teach them something about my culture. So it's like a thing like that. So that's what really helped me shift my perspective of, like, dang, I'm at a white ass place in the middle of nowhere, because I can definitely understand that.

[00:15:10.900] - Niles

I guess from my own personal perspective, too, it's coming, obviously coming from a city and then coming to a place like this. And granted, I've been around a lot of white people for white counterparts, but coming to a location like this can be a little bit daunting because of everything that's around. So I definitely understand that. My last thing would be. I know you talked about some people that had some major impacts in your life, especially here on university, and you mentioned a couple before, but are there any maybe, like, one or two that really stood out to you or made that huge difference where you're like without? And I know you mentioned this earlier, but without them, none of this being here would not have been what it is.

[00:15:51.950] - Brandon

Additional person shots. Miss Barbara. Mr. B.

[00:15:54.900] - Niles

Right.

[00:15:55.970] - Brandon

Legendary. They helped me down. That person is Curtis Johnson mentor. Because my father was in a

nursing home, I was, like, 14, and he got off his ability to speak. Yeah, speech impediment. So navigating black manhood was very difficult for me. So I did a lot of reading, a lot of research. So coming to Sewanee, Curtis Johnson, who worked in Admissions fulfilled is very difficult for me. He taught me a lot about just manhood integrity, you know, helped me build up on that because I had a decent foundation. But he helped me refine that foundation. And getting involved with him at Admissions, that's literally what started everything. Like me getting involved in so many leadership roles, going to the Admissions office, messing with him. I was, like the co-director for the title, but it was like multicultural something where I was hosting meetings with multicultural students, bringing up different topics. I worked with him very closely in the mission's office. Again, I was a tour guide. I will host students. All of that was really helpful. It's just good to see representation on campus and get a different perspective from somebody else who lived a completely different life.

[00:17:16.830] - Brandon

You know what I'm saying? Similarities there. But then he has his own story, and I think that's legendary. Kevin Wilson. Very helpful. Again, I literally went to go grab dinner with him in his son patch yesterday and keep in touch with him. We got some rap songs. April, check this out. You know what I'm saying? I have so many people. Ms. Heisen raider. Miss Shirley. Everybody is really that community based. I come back here, and I know I got love for somebody on campus, and they got love for me. And it's like a genuine thing. No matter how long ago we talked, we pick up right where we left off.

[00:18:06.030] - Niles

That's good.

[00:18:09.210] - Brandon

I'll be remiss about the Courtney Thompson. Oh, man. Because, man, she checked me, bro. She checked me one time about, like just I think I definitely made, like, a sexist remark, and she checked my shit, and I was like and it was like one of them, like I was clueless. I didn't even know that I was saying that.

[00:18:32.190] - Brandon

And she was like she clapped back with something because she has, like, a gentle voice. She clapped back with something. I was like, man, damn, you bagged me. And that's when I really took into consideration, I really mindful of we all can potentially do some harm. If you think you can't do no harm, then you're more likely to do without even knowing it. So Dr. Courtney Thompson, she taught me a lot about my manhood, too, and how to check my privilege for black women. I greatly appreciate black women and their contributions. She know one.

[00:19:14.770] - Niles

So she acted as more of, like, someone to just keep you in line and remind you of the things that you should and shouldn't do.

[00:19:22.900] - Brandon

Yeah, I was just talking to her, like, two weeks ago. I thought I was coming up this show, and she's like my big sister, you know what I'm saying? She looks at me as her little brother, so she provides that guidance and very nurturing, and she holds me accountable. She's not afraid to call me out on my BS. And we both learn from each other, regardless of the age gaps. It challenged me to be a better person and keep me humble. I want to continue to grow, man. Absolutely. It's a beautiful thing. So I would say all of them, everybody that I mentioned, right? But Dr. Courtney Thompson, she did a thing. I took courses with her. I could talk about her for a long time.

[00:20:14.120] - Niles

Yeah.

[00:20:14.330] - Brandon

No, I know. I'm sure. Ms. Barber, too. That's my heart. Man again, it's like I got a great amount from black men. Curtis Johnson, Mr. B. But Dr. Courtney Thompson, Ms. Barbara. Man they nurtured me a

lot because I know personally, but my mom had passed away 14, you know what I'm saying? That nurturing, man.

[00:20:48.770] - Niles
Needed.

[00:20:49.390] - Brandon
It was needed. It filled the gap, filled the void. And those people that's the reason why I had the type of impact that I had when I was on campus. They gave me love. I gave love back. Kind of understanding. Like, these are things I was looking for, and I wanted and I want to be able to give those things back because it might have been harder to acquire for me. Can't pour from an empty glass. They filled me up when I was licensed about the empty or hardly empty. They helped me fill me up just a bit so I could go and pour more into myself and I could give up to others.

[00:21:25.640] - Niles
It's always good to have somebody to Obviously, like, say, keep you accountable, but then also me from the standpoint of pushing you to do greater things and to be greater yourself. Absolutely. So that's great to hear. I love hearing stories like that, because I don't hear too many like that nowadays. Really hear so much and in other areas as well. And it's just reassuring, I guess, from a student perspective, to kind of hear that not a problem. I'm very glad to hear that. I guess the last thing really is, are there any pivotal moments or stories like other stories that you might want to share that had any other types of impacts?

[00:22:02.150] - Brandon
I would say then grad night.

[00:22:04.650] - Niles
Grad night.

[00:22:06.970] - Brandon
Man it was just like everything like a bunch of films, a bunch of emotions, positive emotions, just grateful made it through saloni people. And this is like man, at one point, I didn't think white students would drop out. They was dropping out as I was staying, I thought, man, everybody drops out. I was like, Man, I thought it was more so, like a BIPOC thing.

[00:22:30.300] - Niles
Right

[00:22:31.630] - Brandon
White people was also, like people who had struggles, right?

[00:22:35.190] - Niles
No, absolutely.

[00:22:36.150] - Brandon
So it was just seeing that. But I was like, Dang, me and the homies we made it. You know what I'm saying? Throughout all the struggles, throughout the fears and stuff like that. And it's like, damn, we made it. We grew a lot. I saw a lot of progression through my friends that I helped out with a little bit. I probably helped out with more or I just witnessed, you know what I'm saying? And they did the same thing for me. So grad night, man. We just really enjoyed each other's company house like, man, dang. This jump, this is the last time we all going to be in close proximity together, right? So for any students that last year, seeing you just take it all and spend that time with your loved ones, see staff administration and give gratitude, because that was another thing I did. Write a thank you, call professors and express my gratitude and what they learned and thanking them for that patience with me, you know what I'm saying? Because I'd be like, man, sometimes I'll be shrunk on the class. I used to fall asleep in class. Grad night. Poetry night at the MCC, man.

[00:23:53.200] - Brandon

My boy Nico Darby, this man, Mr. B had like a little jazz night. And it would play jazz based on the type of poetry somebody would be reading.

[00:24:05.060] - Niles

That sounds good.

[00:24:05.860] - Brandon

That jumps. My man Nico, he had like a poem that was really mysterious drama. He was very animated with it. He's just an animated dude, right? During my time from 2014 to 2018, I say something about Nico Darn. People like, oh, yeah. Nico People know about Nico, bro. So that was really cool just to see everybody express themselves in a creative manner and that was really great, man. I think that stuff like that and people coming together as a community to appreciate the art and crack jokes, laugh. I got other stories.

[00:24:50.190] - Niles

I love to hear stuff like that because, man, myself, I need to start interacting and things like that too, because it's definitely needed. That's cool. Like I said, it's always good to hear from obviously graduate black students. Black alumni just kind of get their perspective. Because I know for obviously as a student starting out, it's beneficial for me to kind of hear these things and get perspectives from people like you. Just to kind of see like, middle time here is going to be very meaningful. Trying to make the most of it, connections, what have you. Absolutely.

[00:25:29.050] - Brandon

Good. And also seeing like the alumni come back.

[00:25:31.660] - Niles

Yeah.

[00:25:32.080] - Brandon

Mr. B. Oh, Mr. B out his homecoming party, bro. It was lit. Like what we do. He'll have his floor level where the food would be at. Yeah, drinks and stuff. And then downstairs is like the basement area that's like where most like all the students go to like alumni and play music and stuff, man. Good time. Playing pool, cracking jokes, playing stages, cars. Everybody having a good time. It was like getting later. I just remember Mr. B coming downstairs. This man going to peek his head. He looked around and the man turned off the light and the party got you, Mr. B. You funny, bro. So, yeah. Shouts out to Mr. B, Mrs. Benjamin too, for opening up their space and allowing students to come. Mr B's homecoming homecoming party was lovely. That's it.

[00:26:32.190] - Niles

Like I said, it's always good to hear those stories and what's good. We need more of that. We need more of that, and especially here. And I know you're grateful for your experience and what have you, but it's definitely needed here for those prospective students.

[00:26:47.720] - Brandon

That are coming in, people that are.

[00:26:48.880] - Niles

Looking at the campus and people like me, too. So it's greatly appreciated. Thank you for your time. Thank you for providing comments and commentary and stories and lessons.

[00:27:03.830] - Brandon

I'm just giving back what was given to me, the thing natural thing to life.

[00:27:08.200] - Niles

Yeah. So at the end of the day, that's all that's needed. So, like I said, thank you very much.

[00:27:12.080] - Brandon
Yeah.

[00:27:14.730] - Niles
But if you have nothing else to share, all good.

[00:27:21.130] - Brandon
I would say that it's definitely a difficult place to be at. The transition into have faith in yourself, you know what I'm saying? That's easier said than done, right? It's easier said. When you graduate, you'll be like, yeah, understand. You move different and you have a greater appreciation of your blackness. And I say, really, love is very important to me, but I think just like, level one another differences, there's no epitome of blackness.

[00:28:01.770] - Niles
Right.

[00:28:02.200] - Brandon
You know what I'm saying? Students that recognize that and appreciate that and acknowledge that because sometimes it was times on campus where people would be divisive, like in a black community.

[00:28:14.810] - Niles
Yeah.

[00:28:15.710] - Brandon
Because such and such is not black enough. You know what I'm saying? You isolate people and you don't know. Everybody has their struggles, right. Favorite words is saunder, which is like, in a screw, too. But it's the acknowledgment that everybody around you has just as vivid and complex the life of you being aware of that and being open to connect to people. Get in when you fit in. Allow people going to want to branch out and do their thing. Allow that, you know what I'm saying? Don't be dismissive for other people's experiences and don't project onto other people negative experiences or what you think should happen. Possessive, I think that's just a human thing.

[00:29:12.660] - Niles
Yeah.

[00:29:13.060] - Brandon
US just wanting to be possessive and be in control all the time. So, yeah, sometimes you want to take some L's, but it's only really an L if you just stop and you don't learn from it.

[00:29:27.060] - Niles
Right.

[00:29:28.990] - Brandon
People, we fail to success or we learn successfully.

[00:29:35.390] - Niles
All right.