

[00:00:11.200] - Keenashae Pennicooke

Hello, this is Keenashae Pennicooke. I am a Roberson Project intern and work study student. Today I'm going to be collecting oral interviews for the Benjamin Network. And today I have with me Carla Reed.

[00:00:27.400] - Carla Reed

Hello,

[00:00:32.830] - Keenashae Pennicooke

What year are you from, Carla? What year did you graduate and what did you major in?

[00:00:37.630] - Carla Reed

Hello, I'm Carla Reed. I graduated in 2008. I was a psychology major, and I'm currently in Washington, DC. But I am originally from Little Rock, Arkansas.

[00:00:51.650] - Keenashae Pennicooke

Okay, so we're going to start out with our first question. Can you share a story or stories that stand out in your memories about how you made your way at Sewanee?

[00:01:07.670] - Carla Reed

Let's see, that's a great question. I have to start with my freshman year. Like I said, I'm from Little Rock, Arkansas originally, but I went to Sewanee, and it was an exciting opportunity for me. Not too far from home, but just the right amount of space from home. Right amount of time and space from home. And I have to admit it was an adjustment. It was an adjustment that I didn't know I would have to experience because my high school, I graduated from Little Rock Central High School, so home of the Little Rock Nine, the Desegregation Crisis in Little Rock. And so my high school was bigger. We had more students than at Sewanee, and it was more diverse than Sewanee. So it was an initial adjustment, which was surprising to me. But when I first arrived on campus, I lived in Hunter, I think it was Hunter. It was all women's dorm at the time. And so I had a community of folks who came in with me. I was a part of a program called Arkansas Commitment. So I think very similar to the Posse scholars. We were selected as high achieving high school students of color, and the purpose was to explore liberal arts universities or universities outside the state of Arkansas and then eventually come back to Arkansas.

[00:02:39.010] - Carla Reed

And so there was a group of us who came from Little Rock to Sewanee, and so I initially gravitated to those individuals. One person in particular was my roommate, Brittany Hendrix, also class of 2008. We graduated from Central together. So it started out with having a community that was there in place already, but then Hunter provided me with this unique kind of space. So it was all women's dorm, and I was a part of a mentorship program that Mr. Benjamin created, I think at the time, for freshman. And so I was paired with, I believe she was a sophomore or a junior, and her name was Theta. And to this day, when I see Sata, I just get emotional because she was so pivotal to my introduction to Sewanee. She was a kind spirit. She was also a woman of color. She helped me with everything you can imagine. I had so many questions that I didn't know I would have before I got this money about professors about classes, about where to go, who to meet, activities to get involved with. And she was there, I kid you not. 24/7. So it was Theta, and it was Nasreen.

[00:03:56.930] - Carla Reed

We all lived in that same dorm, and I believe they might have been assistant practice at the time, too. So having that dorm experience my freshman year really cultivated and created community. I could go to Theta, up to her dorm room, ask her questions. I could go to Nasreen. If I was having issues with an assignment, a work assignment, or a class, I could talk to them directly. And that gave me that inside knowledge that I needed to feel comfortable as a freshman in Sewanee, and even to this day. I saw Sata for homecoming last year. I think it was homecoming last year, and I kid you not, I had this reaction that I never thought I would have. I just started crying. Like, when I saw her, I could not stop crying because she was so pivotal, brought up so many memories when I was trying to adjust as a young person to this new space in this new community. She was there, arms wide open, wanting to

share with another woman of color, who was in this new space, too, that she recognized based on her own experience as a new person in that environment.

[00:05:01.500] - Carla Reed

And so I just couldn't stop crying. Everyone's looking at me like, Why are you crying? It's like it's Theta. She's amazing. She was my mentor. She's a wonderful person, and she's doing great things, even to this day. She's a doctor. I think she lives in Tennessee. But that was probably one of my first experiences with Community in Sewanee. And so I've always wanted to give that back. So what she gave to me and what she made me feel I had to give to others. And so I continuously sought out community at Sewanee and supporting people who looked like me. So women, women of color, people of color through the activities that I did. So working with admissions, calling students, admitted students of color, working with the Multicultural Outreach Board, we called ourselves the Mob at the time, which was kind of cute. Yeah, it was like this thing we said, we're the Mob, and we're supporting students of colors on campus. And then, of course, I had the AAA African American alliance. I was a work study student for Mr. Benjamin, and so I had this direct connection on campus because students would always go to his office just to talk, and I would help them with programming.

[00:06:13.040] - Carla Reed

It's like, how do we support students on campus, and how do we connect each other with programming on campus? So I have a lot of fun memories. And building Community in Sewanee

[00:06:26.040] - Keenashae Pennicooke

That's so good now that you're able to give back. You mentioned college organization, Arkansas, commitment. That's something that I'm familiar with. It's how I got to Sewanee, even all the way from Maryland, I was not aware of how to apply to colleges. And I remember just applying to all these different college organizations, hoping someone would help me. And someone from Arkansas committee reached out and asked, would you like applying to schools in the South? And that is how I got here. So that's so strange that we share that connection. What a small world it is. But coming from Arkansas, you talked about how much diverse your school was and then coming to Sewanee, and then you had to adjust. There was a period where you had your mentor, but what was your first impression of Sewanee and coming on campus, maybe as a tour or as a student, was your first impression of the school, of the people?

[00:07:25.570] - Carla Reed

I thought the school was beautiful. I will admit that I was inclined to go somewhere in the city, so I looked at other schools in Atlanta, in Memphis, in Dallas. I wanted to go to a metropolitan city, but my family said, no, you should probably be somewhere less metropolitan so you can focus. And I think what sealed the deal for them was Mr. Benjamin. They met Mr. B, and they had this great conversation with him. He shared his experience at Sewanee and what he was doing for students on campus. And they said, you know, he'd be a great person to support you as a college student, as a young adult. And that's what solidified my starting at 20, going to 20, confirming with 20. But I'll admit it was being from Little Rock. It's a smaller city, but it's still a city. I was born and raised there. And so going to 20 was an adjustment in that sense that it was a rural Southern experience. It's gorgeous, but at the same time, I'm like, what am I supposed to do?

[00:08:34.360] - Keenashae Pennicooke

Yeah.

[00:08:35.030] - Carla Reed

And the question that still comes up, where can I get my hair done? How can I get to the city? How can I get to the city? So just thinking about those things, and we would do that. Like, on the weekends, we would find ways to get to Chattanooga. We would go to Nashville. We had, like, a church in Murfreesboro. We went and got our hair done in Nashville. So we found ways to still have some of that cultural piece that we were looking for that we couldn't get directly on campus. But it was an adjustment. And as I've gotten older, I've come to appreciate how beautiful that campus is. I've learned more about the history specific to the black community in that area. And that's something I didn't really take as much advantage of when I was a student, because I was thinking about being in a

metropolitan city.

[00:09:20.630] - Keenashae Pennicooke

That's understandable. So your impressions then, how did you manage to maneuver your way? I know that at the time you had people who did like, shuttle runs, I heard. So you could get to where you needed to go. And then there were, like, weekly church trips for people who wanted to go to church off the mountain, who weren't physical and wanted to connect more with their faith and make sure that they stayed religious and grounded. How did you maneuver your way after realizing what Sewanee was like? Because I'm still trying to maneuver my way. I've learned how to braid, and I've learned how to do this, and I've learned how to do that just because I do not have a car and it's not accessible for me to get to things off the mountain easily.

[00:10:10.790] - Carla Reed

Yeah, I think it took time. I had to utilize my community, so I was constantly connecting with people, asking people what they did, what resources they had. So I didn't have to start from scratch, necessarily, but I did have to meet the right people and ask the right questions. But what I noticed, that Sewanee would give back as much to me as I was willing to give to it. And so if I showed that there was an interest, if I showed that I was curious, typically I was met with resources and support, which was great. Yeah, we had to find our way there, because growing up in Little Rock, I would go to regular hair salon visits, didn't have to worry about doing my own hair, got this money, started doing my own hair. And that was an experience. Sometimes the hair was looking good, and sometimes it wasn't. And so that was one of the major adjustments. And when you think about community and you think about seeing yourself and feeling like you can show up authentically, that's an important aspect to our community. Because to do good, we have to feel good, and we have to see that we look good, too.

[00:11:24.080] - Carla Reed

And so it took some time to figure that out, but we got there. Like, I have my best friend, I always joke, she's from New York, Jamaican. So totally different experience. But when I tell you she could braid hair, she could straighten hair, she could do anything that you needed. She could do makeup. So she was that person. You found that person who had the skills, and you went to them and they supported you. So when we had the mountaintop dance on campus, we all would get dressed up, go get our dresses, and everyone would meet at this person's dorm, and this was Nica, and she would do everyone's hair. She did my hair, she did my makeup. And she just loved it to the point you could tell that it was something that brought her joy. She had no issue doing it. But we looked good. I got to go back to the pictures. We looked good to be on a mountain in rural Tennessee. East Tennessee.

[00:12:29.810] - Keenashae Pennicooke

Yes.

[00:12:30.660] - Carla Reed

Because I think oftentimes you hear about the guys, like, they find they're a person who can cut hair but for the women, we found that person who could do hair. She could just get us all together and we looked great and we felt good.

[00:12:45.270] - Keenashae Pennicooke

Great. That sounds amazing. So then would you say that the community at So On or the community that you found or built at So On is what made your perspective shift and what encouraged you to stay here?

[00:12:59.130] - Carla Reed

Oh, definitely. I don't hide the fact that freshman year was really isolated in a sense that I was trying to discover community. I was trying to discover myself as a young person. And Sewanee was starkly different from what I had been exposed to in majority middle class black community in Little Rock. Now I'm in this space where we have economic differences. So not only do you have the rural aspect, but you also have the economic. So folks who are coming from upper class, maybe legacies different environments and this economic power and wealth, that wasn't a different experience for me. But

finding my community was largely why I stayed at Sewanee. It took some time, but even to this day, I look back and I have fond memories of the people who I met and who I really connected with, the things that we did, the things that I learned. And it was a variety of communities. I think the beauty of my experience was that it wasn't just in one space, that I also studied abroad, and so I had that community semester in Spain. I did the outreach trips, went to Costa Rica, and I went to Miami.

[00:14:22.300] - Carla Reed

So I built those connections. I also had the black community, too. So it was kind of merging all those things together that brought me some comfort and made it feel like home, made it feel like I could find my way there, stay there, role as a young adult, as a black woman, and give back eventually, which took time to get to.

[00:14:49.150] - Keenashae Pennicooke

That's great. This is your way of giving back. Of course. This is like an oral interview. I'm collecting your history. But I've had so much fun, and it's given me time, a lot of time to reflect while doing these interviews, particularly when we get around to the question of, well, who would you say made a difference in your life at Sewanee? And then they connect, for some people it's professors, for others, it's someone who lived in the Sewanee community but wasn't exactly part of the faculty or staff or didn't go to the school, or it was a classmate. Maybe it was someone that you're under them. There are so many different experiences, and now as a black student in Sewanee, a lot of the experience that you guys describe I can feel myself related to. And so I have to recognize the importance of the network and how much I appreciate it. Of course, I didn't have a chance to meet Mr. Benjamin, but I have seen through so many shared and lived experiences through these interviews, how much he has meant to students here, how much Ben Chitty meant. How much the house meant. I know you guys had the cultural house, and you'd be like, oh yeah, we're going to the house.

[00:16:16.240] - Keenashae Pennicooke

That was it. You had your own space. And so, of course, this is work. This is me collecting. But this is so historically important, culturally important, to understand what you went through there's, connecting to us students here at the gala, at different events that was hosted over this weekend. And it was the most fun we've ever had on the mountain. And a lot of students, I'm sure, who are considering leaving or transferring felt as though this is why we're here. The good academic standing of Sewanee. It was we came here, maybe the scholarships, because it's very affordable for a student, of color, to go here. But now we've connected to people who see us, who understand us, who look like and that provides a different sense of community that I never thought I'd feel.

[00:17:20.640] - Carla Reed

Yes. And you know what it is, it gives you a bigger picture, so it expands your picture. It's not just money. It's sometimes a domestic national community. It's a global community. You have people who are willing to support you, who want to connect with you, who are all over. And so it gives you this broader sense of community than just that isolated with my classmates on campus.

[00:17:49.210] - Keenashae Pennicooke

And I think that is so important. I have a friend who's she's studying political like, she's a political major, study majors and science major. And she talks about all the time how she's never met black lawyers before and the opportunity that she got to meet those black lawyers, how imperative it was to what she's studying and how it boosted her self confidence. She's so much more excited for what she's studying in the future, knowing that she has connections to these people who have studied. They can guide her on. What should you do, what classes should you take? Maybe there are some classes you should take on the mountain. Maybe you should head off take some classes during the summer, how to catch up doing this, what to do during your summer. Having a mentor and guide throughout your entire college process is so important, especially when you don't have that connection, your family life, or you don't have someone guiding you or helping you. Because advisors, they're sent to fix, but success isn't ready made for all. The same path for one isn't going to be the same path for another. And especially as students or people of color, we're going to have very different experiences.

[00:19:15.920] - Keenashae Pennicooke

We're going to need very different advice, different mentoring, a type of advisorship that the school isn't always able to provide for us. We can find that through some staff, but they aren't able to give everything. And so this network, collecting these interviews is so important. Making connections, giving back to the community. I need to thank you and all that you are doing because you giving back to the community, even though you may not see it right now, just know that students definitely being affected by your presence and being influenced by the network.

[00:19:58.610] - Carla Reed

Well, I want to tell you so I feel like it's a duty people have poured into me. And so I think about the Mr. Bees when I was a student, and I was curious about the workplace, and he would talk to me about his experiences as a black person in America. And it made me think, so that's my duty, to give back to others so that you don't have to figure out the same things that I had to figure out. There's no reason that we should duplicate our efforts. I think about Kim. Heisenwriter. I did two Tonya public affairs internships. I thought I was going to law school at the time. It's not too late. I might change my mind. But I worked with the Arkansas Supreme Court and the City Attorney of Little Rock. And so that advocacy piece, that greater sense of duty, is not just you, it's not just me, it's us, right? We have to expand it. And so the network, we hope, will continue throughout the year so that each one of us can contribute in whatever ways we go, are necessary at the time. And I always tell students who recently graduated from Sewanee, especially black students, because sometimes you do you're like, I'm ready to get away from this institution.

[00:21:15.440] - Carla Reed

I did my four years. I'm ready to go into the workplace or to graduate school. And I always say, you go back when you need to, you give back when you need to. You take your time. You don't force it. And so for me, now is just that time that I can give back, that I can support. I'm in the place where I want to contribute. I have skills to contribute, and it's just a perfect time to do so. I'm so thrilled. For me, it's all about connecting people. And I love when I go back for Benjamin Network Weekend, I see the life ups like you see the students connecting with alums who want to give to them and also alums who are getting and receiving from the students and learning new things as well. So for me, that's the purpose of the network. We're connecting with students and the alums and also the Sewanee community. We're giving back in the best way that we know how. And it's the start of something bigger. I'm really excited about, but I'd be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the people who poured into me when I was young and curious and confused and trying to figure out what comes next.

[00:22:28.450] - Carla Reed

So that's a lot of the reason that we do what we do, specifically why I do what I do, and that's what I was taught. I've always been raised in community and to look out for others and to support others and to connect, to build. It's not an individual thing, it's a community thing. So I'm happy that you get to experience this because it wasn't something that I had while I was at Sewanee.

[00:22:52.410] - Keenashae Pennicooke

And I think that while of course I feel amiss, I'm sad that you didn't get to experience this community. As time goes on, I felt even more appreciative of the fact that there were so many black graduates from Sewanne, because I remember thinking there's probably going to be 40 people there, maybe 20. I don't know. I was in that range. I was like, okay, so it's not going to be a lot. I'm going to sign in maybe like, three people who want to do interview, and that's going to be it. There is no way that much Black people graduated from Sewanee. I mean, it's Sewanee, but having that many people I have never seen that many black people at Sewanee in my life, and it was a comfort to me and I'm sure to every other student, being surrounded by each other, talking to each other, making connections with one another, understanding one another. And I don't know, that was just something that's going to stay with me for as long as I but are there any other stories that you'd like to share? You talked a little bit about you being a psychology major. Do you still use that major now?

[00:24:15.380] - Keenashae Pennicooke

What are you doing now?

[00:24:19.270] - Carla Reed

Yeah, psychology was my major. I've always been curious about people, how people think, what motivates people to do the things that they do. And so I'm currently in organizational development, so I still use my degree within organizations, and I focus primarily on equity. How do we make workplaces more equitable for people of color, for women, and through the systems that we use in our organizations and the policies that we implement. And I love what I do, and I want to change it for the world. I have kind of navigated my career in different ways. And so not only do I do the Hr.org development piece, but I've also been the chair of organizations that focus on women's advancement in politics and professional life in DC. I've been on boards that support women who are running for office. And so all of this is connected to me. It's all connected in the sense that what does the future look like where everyone can thrive in the workplace, outside of the workplace, in their leadership? And so I definitely use my psychology degree. I love psychology. I did go back and forth between psychology and econ because at the time we had a professor, her name was Dr.

[00:25:48.120] - Carla Reed

Mohitan, and just econ and system. There was a program that I think you could go to Bangladesh to learn about one of the communities that was using, like, micro finance at the time to support women's leadership and women in business. So that was just something that really appealed for me to me from the start, and I've been able to see it through and stay connected to it. Yeah. Women in leadership, women in business, women in politics, equity in the workplace, systems, policies. That's my thing. And so it's definitely connected directly to the psychology piece, I believe.

[00:26:33.490] - Keenashae Pennicooke

And so we get around to our last question. Who would you attribute, if you can, who made a difference in your life at Sewanee? And it doesn't have to be one particular person. It can be multiple. Various go off.

[00:26:55.430] - Carla Reed

Yeah. So there's, of course, multiple people. The person who's at the top of that list, I've mentioned a few times who our network is named after Mr. Benjamin. So I had a my freshman year, I had a work study position that didn't quite work out for me because they literally wanted me to work. No study, just work. And I was like, I cannot sustain this. I need to study. This is rigorous. This is challenging. I need to adjust. And so Mr. B literally took me under his wing. It was like, you can work with me as my work study student. And so I did more study in Mr. B's office and work. And this is where I discovered all the things. It's like, I'm curious about law. I'm curious about being a black woman in America, in the workplace. And I literally talked to him. I just was able to talk to him. And he really helped cultivate me and helped shape my mind as a young black woman at that time. I mentioned Kim Heisenwriter at the time, it was career services, always entertaining me. I would just pop in her office and have these big ideas and these questions, and she would listen and provide me with resources and make connections, which was everything.

[00:28:18.770] - Carla Reed

And then, of course, like I said, the Thetas' who comes from a fellow, like, a community of color, woman of color, who just poured into me as a freshman and made sure I was okay. And sometimes all it takes is someone recognizing you and seeing you and asking if you're okay and listening to you and wanting to support you. So, fellow students, and I'm glad you brought up the house. I didn't say anything about the house, but we had so many fun memories at the house. Those step shows we had, those parties, the porch slams. I credit all of that to being young and learning how to lead and how to speak up, how to advocate for myself, the friends who provided me with different experiences. Like I said, Nica, being Jamaican and from New York, she's black. She has a different experience than me. I'm from the south. I'm a black woman in the south still. So I've learned so much from her and her experience as a Caribbean woman from the north, and I hope I'm not missing anyone. The Doctor Hughes, who's still in psychology. We talk about cognitive psychology, how the brain works.

[00:29:33.510] - Carla Reed

There's so many people. I felt like I'm just missing folks. And then, of course, like, Nikki Hamilton recruited me to 20, and she still has 20. And I get to see her and work with her in a different light. And

I hope that I just hope that I'm doing something that will leave something behind for someone else to pick up and build and continue. I think that's what we all think of, especially when we think of what is legacy. For me, it's more so community building connections. And so 20 left the last impression on me. I learned a lot. Sewanee ignited my passion for travel. If I think about Dr. Spacarelli took us abroad to Spain. Like, this girl from Arkansas traveling all across Spain and going to Morocco. The first person in my family to go overseas, the first person in my family to graduate from college. So there's just so much, and I'm forever grateful for a lot of us, it takes some time to connect the dots, but once you connect the dots, you really appreciate that experience. So I'm at the point where I can connect the dots, and we all get there when we need to, right?

[00:30:47.810] - Keenashae Pennicooke
Absolutely.

[00:30:49.330] - Carla Reed
Yes.

[00:30:50.770] - Keenashae Pennicooke
Thank you.

[00:30:54.210] - Carla Reed
Anytime. Thank you for taking the time. Thank you for doing this and your leadership on campus.

[00:30:59.270] - Keenashae Pennicooke
Of course. This has been an amazing experience for me, collecting. I think this has been my favorite part of my work studies thus far, actually getting to connect with black people and hearing their experiences. This has been amazing. I'm giving you the space. Any shout outs that you want to make, put in the plug where you're working, whatever you need to do.

[00:31:35.090] - Carla Reed
Say Benjamin network, board members. This is new. It's never easy starting something new. And so I'm forever grateful that people would trust me to lead something. And oftentimes it's so fascinating because these are my classmates, so just the fact that they trust me, they're all accomplished in their own right. And I just forever and grateful to have a team of people who are invested just as much as I. Sewanee students. Got to shout you out. I know it's a process, but there's a beauty in that community, a uniqueness in that community, and I hope that the students saw that. When other students came back to campus, you can see they were all over the place doing different types of things and still maintaining community. To all the folks who impacted me at Sewanee, my professors who I didn't name, the faculty who I did name, the friends who I probably should have named, everyone is important and has been important to my journey and my growth as a professional with a black woman, but a young woman, all the things yeah. I just thank you for the time and the interest.

[00:32:57.830] - Keenashae Pennicooke
Of course. Okay. And that's going to take thank. You so much for staying.

[00:33:05.000] - Carla Reed
Thank you.