

[00:00:01.130] - Interviewer

It. So Benjamin Network oral history project. Your story. My name is Audrey Ryze and I'm interviewing Bruce Manuel. ID number 1.224. Okay, so I'm going to let you continue with this story of so you took a tour here at Sewanee straight out of high school, right?

[00:00:30.940] - Bruce Manuel

Yes. Reverend Jeff Walker, who was he taught a class at my boarding school that I attended in Houston when I was a senior in high school, he was coming up for a meeting. He had been talking to me about Sewanee, and I was looking at different schools. So I brought him up on at that time, he said what they call party weekends. Yeah. I don't know if they still have them, but they always have a fall party weekend and spring party weekend.

[00:00:58.810] - Interviewer

Okay.

[00:00:59.220] - Bruce Manuel

And so that's what it is. People just kind of cut loose it seems. I was in high school and I was like, wow, great. This is a fun place. And I was used to being in a country. The mountain is so beautiful. I just was like, wow, I would like to try this. Not like to get out of Texas. I wanted to do something different. It was different coming to a school where there were so few people of color. That was kind of intimidating. But other than that, I still was excited about the school. It was different environment at the time. This is mid 70s. There are a lot of hippies on campus. A lot of people are hippies. There's still a lot of that sixty's and seventy's radicalism that was going on campus, so- I really that sort of appealed to me. Yeah, because you also had Sewanee being a very conservative school. They still have that very deep conservatism, too, because at that time, as an undergrad student, we had to wear coat and ties to class every day. Yes, it was a dress in girls. I think girls were required to wear dresses.

[00:02:23.700] - Bruce Manuel

I think they would wear pants. A lot of people just violated if they want to make an issue of it, they would. But people yeah, we were required to wear coconut class. Yes, class every day. And at that time, we only had a few, one, two dorms that were coed. Most of them were male dorms or female dorms. And the rule was, like, for example, you couldn't be in a female dorm, women's dorm after 10.

[00:03:02.750] - Interviewer

Okay. Yeah.

[00:03:06.650] - Bruce Manuel

For guys like a girlfriend. And you stayed overnight in a dorm room. You had to go on by 06:00 in the morning, creeping, sneaking and creeping. It was funny. And at that time, the dorms had these elderly women mostly, like, what was it called? Matrons. Some of them were kind of laid back in the women's dorms were much more draconian. They really would pay attention over what's going on with my girls who sneak me creeping in my dorm. It was kind of interesting, but yeah, it was an interesting combination. The other thing I seen is very, very different at that time with that. Now, a lot of kids are involved in the Greek Greek organizations. I think it's like 90 plus percent at that time it was nowhere near that. It was much more like it was more like, I don't know, maybe 50% were in the Greeks. A lot of kids were independent, GDI's we'd call them goddamn independents. And so, yeah, so we had a really big intramural program, playing softball, football, basketball. The kids in Greek organizations, if you weren't a Greek organization, you still participate. So a lot of the independents formed their own teams.

[00:04:53.710] - Bruce Manuel

Some of them were formed around dorms, in the chicken dorm form, like softball team. I played softball and played basketball. So, yeah, that was a lot of fun. And a lot more things were student driven, I think. I think it was very different being an African American student here. There was still at least like less than ten years after the Martin King assassination, and the racism in the community was really bad. Tracy City, Guinea County, was a Sundown County. I remember one time I went with a group of kids. We went to Nashville to see Bob Mario. Yeah, Bob Mario played him. This is when he

was on that Davon barbus tour. And so he was playing Vanderbilt in a gym. It was really amazing concert, but the guy one person driving a bunch of Pops in his pickup truck. It's like fall, it's cold. I remember for some reason, I think the driver got lost or something on the way back and they stopped for directions. I was in the back in the bed of the truck with some other kids. We were kind of covered over back with blankets and stuff. I remember they drove this place, and it must have been a KKK gathering, some kind of white supremacist thing going on, because I remember a couple of kids in front of the truck, they said they said, Bruce, don't raise up.

[00:06:35.650] - Bruce Manuel

Don't show your head. Just be cool. And yeah, they were like, I have to ask the folks, because I couldn't really see what was going on, but apparently it was some real, real big time white supremacists that were having some kind of a gathering or whatever. We came back, but we had a lot of instances, a lot of cops on campus, but not a lot of the cops. Some of the cops on campus were very racist at that time. Very racist attorneys. Some of the traditional attorneys were extremely racist, like the SAE. Some of our other names, SAEs and KAS, were really, really racist. I mean, they were just unapologetically racist. And it's funny, because when I left Sewanee and graduated 1980, I bought out to return, and I didn't return for 30 years. Part of the reason was I joined the military after graduating. Yeah, I was in the Navy for 20 years, so I was always stationed around different places. The post I was ever stationed was to was Norfolk, Virginia.

[00:07:46.570] - Interviewer

Okay.

[00:07:49.110] - Bruce Manuel

At the end of my career, I was in Station, New Orleans, but in 2010, I came back to alumni Weekend hometown, and I saw a lot of the changes that occurred. I saw the number of students that were here, kids of color and so on. It rekindled my love of the mountain, because my experience was not all bad. I had some great, great friends and some great experiences, so it rekindled that love. I had about three years after that, I was getting close to where I could I was thinking about where I would like to retire because I was working for the government at the time, civil service. After the military, I went to the University of New Orleans and I got my MBA, so I went to work for Department Defense as a civil servant, as an It worker. So 30 years of working for the government, I said, I wonder where I'd like to retire. So I started thinking about retiring here. So I got an agent in around 2013, agent calls, and there's a house coming for sale, it's a nice little house, thinking might be interested. And he said, it's well made, the older house was in good shape, so I came up, I saw it, I liked to put down an offer, so I bought it, like, in 2013.

[00:09:18.250] - Bruce Manuel

So I started renting it to some staff members that were at the time. And then in 2016, I retired myself, adopted, retired from the government. So then I decided to move up here.

[00:09:30.140] - Interviewer

That's what made your way back up here?

[00:09:32.250] - Bruce Manuel

Yeah, I've been here since 2016. The other reason why I said move is because I really wanted to develop as a writer, because that's why I really wanted to be when I graduated from Sewanee. Okay, was to be a writer.

[00:09:54.890] - Interviewer

And what was your degree? What did you major in?

[00:09:58.400] - Bruce Manuel

I was English major, English literature. So I really want to be a writer, but at the time, there was really no guidance for young artists to help you sort of plan out a career, and the school letters was not around, so one of the writers conference had not been established, so there's really no guidance. I grew up in the hood. I grew up from blue collar family, so I really wasn't in a position where I could be

at home and then have time to really think about how I wanted to, what path I would take to follow my purpose.

[00:10:44.950] - Interviewer
Right, you saw nine to five at home.

[00:10:47.770] - Bruce Manuel
Exactly, and so I joined the military. And the other thing I joined the military is because I was really interested in technology. Even though I was in this major, I knew that I could foresee that. This is in the early 80s, before the Internet, before personal computers, before all this stuff. I could see that technology was going to be more it's that sense that there's going to be more part of our lives. So I wanted to get into crypto, learning more about technology, get more incorporated. Plus, as a writer, as a reader, I've always been interested in science fiction. So that genre of literature, I discovered that the Navy and Air Force are very much technology driven.

[00:11:34.410] - Interviewer
Yeah.

[00:11:34.740] - Bruce Manuel
So that's why I joined the Navy, also. The Navy at that time, there were a lot of great Navy movies. That's when Top Gun was out. And officer and gentlemen, hunt for Red October. There were so many different popular Hollywood actor movie. So I decided to go to the Navy. It was tough being a news major in a motto, engineer oriented world. But the thing that helped me was I've always had a good aptitude in math, so that helped me a lot.

[00:12:21.150] - Interviewer
You mentioned the military. Was there still, like, a military presence here?

[00:12:26.750] - Bruce Manuel
No, in fact, it was in the early 70s, maybe 72 or something like that. 73. The students voted to disband the RTC unit. In fact, I had a friend who was a seminarian at the time, an older gentleman. He was a retired Air Force officer, and he was trying to he was encouraging him to join the Air Force, but out to to join an Air Force articulation unit at Vanderbilt. But I just couldn't see how to do that because Vanderbilt so far away. I wasn't sure how I would work that. I didn't really consider it at that time. But at that time, the Sewanee military cabinet was still around.

[00:13:17.700] - Interviewer
Okay.

[00:13:18.290] - Bruce Manuel
And so they merged with St. Andrews in 1980.

[00:13:24.540] - Interviewer
That's right.

[00:13:26.770] - Bruce Manuel
In fact, I graduated just before Eric Benjamin came here.

[00:13:31.490] - Interviewer
Okay. Right before. Okay, so you didn't have any so, like, who were, like, talk to me about your experiences with so you mentioned it was about maybe 25 kids of color.

[00:13:45.160] - Bruce Manuel
That was when I first came, that first year. My first year. Majority of them graduated that year.

[00:13:54.970] - Interviewer
So did you have any interactions with the other kids of color that were here?

[00:13:59.240] - Bruce Manuel

Oh, yeah, like I said, most of them that were here at the time were seniors. When I was a freshman, I was a little freshman. I didn't have this in common with me.

[00:14:14.290] - Interviewer

Okay.

[00:14:15.000] - Bruce Manuel

I was kind of like an all then, you know, and so as time went on, there were fewer and fewer of us, you know, once I remember joining about five students on campus. Yeah. During that period of time, during, you know, the left mid to late 80s. Mid to late 70s. Yeah, there were very few of us. An interesting thing, in fact, I left at one point for the absence after my sophomore year, and I almost went to Howard University. Almost left with the Howard I remember I left that fall. And at the time, I was living home, and there was a couple after a couple who were on the board, prestige of the school I went to, and they were both graduates of Howard, and so I met them that fall, and they were like, you're out of school. We can get you an hour. I was like, that's great. So they said, well, we can get you in until fall and fall. So I didn't want to be out of school for an entire year. Probably someone said, okay, well, why don't you maybe go to junior college here in Houston in the interim, until you go?

[00:15:33.080] - Bruce Manuel

Nobody was in the options, and I really started thinking, I left Sewanee. I was here academic scholarship. I was a Wilkins scholar, okay? And so I had full academic scholarship. So I did work study because I didn't feel like I was working, getting back for my education, which was the model of the boarding squalantis called something for something. Quick pro co. That's their motto. I decided to come back to Swine in the spring, and I wanted to prove to myself that I could make it here. And so in the interim, I was out of school. I was, like, working. Just labor jobs, working, warehouse working. I did back breaking work at the warehouse here. I moved up here in the summertime at that time. I think it's still there. It's in that area you've moved. Okay. So you know where you're in Georgia, and then you come back into Tennessee, and you pass that welcome center?

[00:16:50.800] - Interviewer

Yes.

[00:16:51.280] - Bruce Manuel

And then there's, like, this you can see Lookout Mountain off to the right. So there's like a valley between in between the interstate and Lookout Mountain. In that valley is a lot of warehousing, industrial things. There's this huge food warehouse. It's like a quarter mile square, and they used to I guess it's still there. They would bring these train cars loaded with products from companies like General Meals, Pillsbury, those kind of companies, and so they would chip 100 pound bags of flour, 100 pound packages, like cereal, stuff like that. And so these rail cars would come in. It was like, hot humidous here. So they'd be sitting in this hot rail car. So you bring them in the warehouse, and so they have to offload. But you can't just offload with a forklift, at least at that time. So you'd have to like, two men would have to go inside of the rail car. You'd have to offload about eight pallets of that stuff and then restack it out on the floor to make room for the forklifts coming in offload. So these real cars be sitting in the sun. So it's like, over 100 degrees inside of rail cars, like an oven.

[00:18:04.570] - Bruce Manuel

You get in there, and you hump in those 100 pound bags, flour and this and that. I worked there for about several months. I said, yeah. I realized to myself, this is work. This is work, and school is not work. I was like, School is I had a picture, it was like, three year old boy working like a dog, and you got a full scholarship at Sewanee. I said, I'm going to go back there and I'm going to prove myself so I can make it there. And I came back. I was not on the tour. I didn't have much of a social life, but I knew what I was here for, so I just focused on my education, and I think maybe it was my background and just kind of going through a trial by fire. I developed a lot of resilience, and I think that's something that's so important for kids to develop resilience, because it's not going to when you get out in the world, it's not all going to be peaches and cream. That's something I always sort of emphasize. And

even with things that the university does with kids of color, I know it's important to have kids feel at home here and those type of things, but there also needs to be part of the thing that I think is responsibility is to teach life skills and resilience and being able to bounce back from disappointment, from defeat, from encountering obstacles.

[00:19:55.310] - Bruce Manuel

That is absolutely critical, almost more critical than getting a good education, because there's a lot of smart people who are complete business because they never learn how to deal with disappointment. They never learn how to deal with, how do I keep moving forward despite the fact that the people that I'm with, they don't like me or they don't or they don't want me there, I find it so important. I learned that also in the military, you know, that it's so important to to discover what what is your purpose, you know, in life, you know, what what brings meaning to your life. And because if you can if you can find that you can follow that, then those types of things, those disappointments, those things that knock you down, finding your purpose is what will help you pick yourself back up. Rocky movie, it was like the last rocky movie went up, the last and it was the one where it was like the rags, the richest story, where he's poor, he becomes a champ. He's rich. And on this one, Aidan has died. He's back in the hood. That's when he's, like, trying to boxer Tommy.

[00:21:25.610] - Bruce Manuel

And so he's like Rocky, he runs it to his son. He's grown, and his son's like some Wall Street big shop. And so his son doesn't want to talk to him. He's like, shamed on him because Rocket's poor now and everything. Like, he's lost all his money. His brother in law gambled away all his money. Poor business decisions because his brother in law came like his financial advisor. So anyway, the son just really rejects him. So Rocky tells him, he says something like, it doesn't matter how many times you get knocked down. He says, Nothing will give you a knockout punch, like life. He says it doesn't matter how many times you get knocked down. What matters is how many times you get back up and keep moving forward. That's it. I think I learned that at the school I went to before I came.

[00:22:29.330] - Interviewer

To Sewanee name the school?

[00:22:33.080] - Bruce Manuel

Yeah. Let me write it down for you.

[00:22:34.370] - Interviewer

Okay. Right at the bottom.

[00:22:37.510] - Bruce Manuel

Yeah. It was a great program because it really taught me a lot. It's not called Chinkle pin prep.

[00:22:49.980] - Interviewer

Chinkle pin prep.

[00:22:56.990] - Bruce Manuel

Let's see. I'll put down there their website, just case you want to check out.

[00:23:07.780] - Interviewer

I have, like, one last question for you, because you mentioned a lot about how your high school helped prepared you, and actually just being in that environment, being exposed to farm life, then coming up here wasn't, like, a big shock. What you learned, being an inner city kid and just even what you learned in Chattanooga, working in a warehouse, like, doing something that was laborous instead of just focusing, how that actually instilled a lot of you to be successful here. What was it that you learned here that helped me be successful that you can pinpoint? I learned this year because you even spoke about the military, which I know is huge. The military does inform it in your life. But what was it about your experience here that you think stuck with you or that you've learned that was embedded in your core of who you are?

[00:24:10.870] - Bruce Manuel

Well, one of the people that really was a great helped me inspiration was Ms. Chitty. Elizabeth. Ms. Chitty. Elizabeth Chitty. She was, like, the financial officer.

[00:24:23.010] - Interviewer

Okay.

[00:24:23.540] - Bruce Manuel

She was just so great. She had a lot of faith in me. She helped me. She was a great lady. In fact, she helped me. She gave me scholarships. I go to Oxford program in the summer. We spent summer semester in Oxford. Oxford, England.

[00:24:46.300] - Interviewer

Yeah.

[00:24:46.850] - Bruce Manuel

And so that was great. She always stood back behind me and encouraged me and stuff, and she said for a lot of kids, they were scholarships, and she's just great. And so one of the things I learned was, I think the important lesson was that in terms of dealing with people looking past these superficial gems that people place, one of the things I learned, one of the very important lessons I learned, I think, here is that and it kind of relates to racism. Racism. People use racism as an excuse to behave badly when there's something else that is underlying their motives. And people use racism as a way of getting away with it, because very often when people do something that they know it's wrong to someone that everybody around them considers the other, then they can get away with it. And so the thing that I've learned, just like the things that used to happen to us, things that still happen to us, people coming, I've learned to, number one, to understand my own value and to not react to what people do. Because one thing I've learned is that if people don't know you and they respond to you with hostility, it's not me that they're being hostile for.

[00:26:39.240] - Bruce Manuel

There's some construct they've developed in their own mind, and so I don't allow that to trigger me. Once they run, jump, to react in kind, I basically just don't allow that to throw me off my game. And so then I can look at that person very closely and see what's really going on.

[00:27:15.620] - Interviewer

So you know, that hostility, there's something more

[00:27:22.740] - Bruce Manuel

Absolutely Just like, you know, we take the historical case, like the the case in black Wall Street, Tulsa, Oklahoma, you know, when the white mob burned down, it was because of jealousy, you know, and envy of the success of these black people. You know. You know, they wanted their land. They were jealous of their success. They used their racism to be able to perpetrate crimes against these people because they knew they did away with it. That's one thing that I learned, I think, here, is that's one of the reasons why I talked to when I had the opportunity to mentor students to don't just isolate yourself within your group. There's too much of that that goes on. I see that just from the outside looking oftentimes in the Greek organizations, because they sort of isate themselves within people that just like them, look like and think like them. And I try to encourage students to try to get to know people who are different from you, get to know them, and you'll find that there's more common ground than what you may you may believe, you know, either by how what you project or what they project, you know.

[00:28:56.530] - Bruce Manuel

And so that's something I learned, you know, and and also I learned just love the literature and being intellectually curious. I think if I if I think Sewanee actually helped me have the courage to go to the military, you know, because I made it here.

[00:29:20.060] - Interviewer

Wait a minute. I like that.

[00:29:31.340] - Bruce Manuel

And that was far harder, far more difficult. Military break it down. There's a lot of people that come out broken, a lot of veterans broken. That's why a lot of veterans have so much suicide rates. It's very high. Veterans.

[00:29:50.100] - Interviewer

I think that's part of the design, that it's a system that breaks you down so they can build you up to what they want.

[00:29:56.550] - Bruce Manuel

Absolutely. They want to reconstruct your self image. They're always trying to tell you who you should be.

[00:30:04.410] - Interviewer

Do you think here did you experience your teachers or your academics or maybe Schultz? Schultz trying to build you up into something they saw you being? Or do you think or was it different? Did you experience because there's a molding process.

[00:30:23.760] - Bruce Manuel

Yeah, absolutely. I had a couple professors who I thought were they displayed a certain arrogance. Yeah. And oftentimes either I know at least one example of a person that really hadn't really spent much time outside of the academic bubble who really hadn't experienced the world, who really didn't know who had no idea where I came from. So my friend Jeff I didn't have any dress shirts or ties, anything like that. My friend Jeff gave me some shirts and ties and stuff that he had that would fit me. I remember there was a lady I knew, she was auditing class in class. So one day after class, she told me, she said, rich family. Don't you like what she's like? You come from rich family. I was like, no, I didn't because I didn't care myself because they perceived I didn't care myself how they perceived a typical black person a typical black person from from poor neighborhood, you know? You know, and and because that was one of the things that Mr. Moore, Robert P. Moore, who started school instilling us the confidence to know you are just as good as anybody else. Your value is what you put into what you love to do.

[00:32:11.060] - Bruce Manuel

It's not based on what someone else imposes on you and not to look for some external entity to tell you who you are because that happens constantly. That's one thing I learned that in the military, taught me that great deal because like I said, there's always someone telling how you should dress, how you should look, how you should wear your hair, how you should eat, who should hate who you should admire, everything. I always kept this part of me that was always sort of on the outside of that.

[00:32:55.760] - Interviewer

Yeah.

[00:32:56.720] - Bruce Manuel

And so it taught me to keep that part of me. I think that's one reason why when I did get out of the military, I was able to it took me some years, but to recover to who I am, more of who I am, those are lessons that are really important, I think that's very lacking, I think, nowadays, I think, because so social media and things like that always trying to project this influence on kids about who you should be or how you should look or how you should think, et cetera. And so it's very hard, I think, for young people to develop the judgment to think critically about what sort of influences are on them. And we're not always aware of it, but just having the capacity to at least question where your thoughts and attitudes are coming from it's incredibly important. It's difficult. It's something I have to do every.

[00:34:03.880] - Interviewer

Day to make sure your own thoughts are your own and not absolutely you just regurgitate and repeating somebody else.

[00:34:12.680] - Bruce Manuel
Absolutely.

[00:34:14.760] - Interviewer
That's good. Is there anything else you want to leave us with?

[00:34:20.460] - Bruce Manuel
No, just appreciate you listening to me

[00:34:24.930] - Interviewer
Absolutely, This was good. I hope we can do this again. If you would like a follow up.

[00:34:30.720] - Bruce Manuel
Sure.

[00:34:31.210] - Interviewer
They can come sit on your porch.

[00:34:36.300] - Bruce Manuel
I'll give him you're welcome. Come by have glass of water and chat anytime you'd like.

[00:34:43.860] - Interviewer
Sounds good.