

Kitty Dumas  
3/2/12  
Oxford,MS  
Interviewed by David Rae Morris  
Transcript

KD: I'm Kitty Dumas and I'm from Eupora, Mississippi.

DRM: When were you at the university?

KD: I was at the university from 1980 to 1984.

DRM: And what was the racial climate like when you were here?

KD: The racial climate in the beginning uh I would say, was fairly tolerate, and it was much like the communities that a lot of us came from. We were pretty separate socially for the most part. Um but we were cordial and friendly toward each other. We worked together on, you know, whatever projects that we had. Certainly at the newspaper, the Daily Mississippian, um class projects, or other things that we had to do. But it was um it was a mirror I think of the culture that, that we came from in Mississippi.

DRM: What do you remember most about your time here?

KD: What do I remember? Um, I remember the um certainly the unrest that we had here. Um, you know, back to your first question. I mean that, that sense of tolerance changed certainly after a couple of years because I had the uh the fortune in, in a lot of ways to be here during the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of integration. Uh, and you know 20 years is not a long time, at all. Uh, you know although, you know when, when we came to the university we certainly did not come here fearing for our lives under any circumstances. There was a lot that, that happened in 20 years, that moved the university forward, it moved racial relations forward. I think just proximity—people being together every day, the races being together, you know, every day at this university, you know, moved the ball to some degree. Um, but I think you know there were still things that still—for example, the confederate flag um more social interaction. You know, there, there was still a lot of uh a lot of fear, underlying. Um, and as I've said, you know, we were going from a place uh in '62 uh that was forced integration um where there had been violence and that type of thing, a lot of strife. So, you know, in, in 20 years, you know, we were just happy to be, I think, a, a lot of us, in this um, you know, fairly tranquil, fairly tolerate environment. Um, but there were, it was kind of like the perfect storm during that period of '80- to '84. Um, where you had all these you know, these thunderheads building on the horizon. Because as we approached the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, James Meredith was, was coming back. Um, I don't know if was the first time, I believe it might have been. Uh, and you know the university had before it a uh an opportunity or you know, kind of a

conundrum, you know. Were they going to--how were they going to deal with this 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary? So um they determined that they couldn't call it a celebration they ended up calling it an observance. So for a while there was a lot of angst that we don't see today at the 50<sup>th</sup>. There was so much angst over what to do with all of that. And I think you know the other thing that happened was that um, you know, we did elect the first black cheerleader here. Uh. and you know I think it was a kind of a, a fluke thing that happened because they uh, you know, they did run an African-American uh boy and an African-American girl thinking that they might, you know, be a matched set kind of thing. But, you know, uh as anybody who's been to Ole Miss knows you know, politics are fairly complicated here. And politics is, is a way of life, and has produced any number of our very well know politicians in [laughs] in this country. And you know politics are very serious business here, and things do go awry from time to time. So uh, you know, by some sort of fluke, um the male won and the young woman did not. Which presented a whole set of challenges, um I mean he as going to have to uh you know, lift up a, a young white woman which you know we look at that now, you know, and people—like what are you talking about? And even to say that, you know, that a cheerleader was elected, people look at that and go “what's the big deal?” You know, they just hear the word cheerleader and you know, their eyes cross: “What's the big deal about that?” But it was very serious, a very serious, you know, set of circumstances that were set in motion. And, so um here was this young man who, um right afterwards. I asked him, as, as a young reporter, um “Will you wave the, the Confederate flag, and he said “No.” And um at that point that set a whole other set of, of things in motion. Um because with that statement, that brought in during that period of time, the KKK . Uh a lot of people don't remember that. Uh but they, they were not allowed on campus but they came to--uh I guess it's uh you know, the highway, it's right across from the campus. And they would come in their robes and hoods and you know, they would change into them right there. And you know people would watch them and uh, I covered some of that. Uh and students would ride around with these enormous flags and uh you know, throw them at you which happened to me, I'm standing on the steps of Deaton Hall. Of course, you know someone throws the fag, flag at you and says you now the n-word—pick it up kind of thing. Those kind of things were not unusual, um to happen. So, you know, um it was just a very, very difficult time uh that we went through. But I think it was something that had to happen because I think it moved, it moved the ball forward and it brought all of these things that were not being talked about to the, to the floor.

DRM: What was the first you heard of James Meredith?

KD: You know I honestly don't remember uh the first I've heard of him. You know I think from the time that I was, was a kid, the school was actually integrated the year I was born. Um, and I had heard the name at home you know from, from my mother. Uh, you know, not as much of course as, as MLK or Medgar Evers, but I had certainly heard the name.

DRM: How has Mississippi and the University evolved in the last 50 years since Meredith?

KD: Um, well first of all I think there has been tremendous change. Um you know I didn't come back for a little while, and um you know if I did it was sporadic. And it's almost like, I feel almost like Rip Van Winkle [laughs] um you know when I really look at all the changes that, that have taken place. You know to read about it from afar is one thing but to see it is another. Um I think that um the university, you know these are kind of hard won gains um I think that you know that things that the administration and students struggled with and a lot of times not so well, you know in, in the public eye as they tried to deal with, with changes moving forward. But I think in the end um, you know, there's a lot more acceptance um and less defensiveness about the past. And you know we are, we are the Confederate statue, we are the statue of James Meredith. You know, all of this is representative of who we are as a state and as a community, and as a people. Um, and I think uh you know, it is true what Faulkner said if you are going to understand the world, you have to understand a place like Mississippi.

DRM: Are we "there?"

KD: Are we there? I don't we're complete there, no. Um, but at the same time, I think that you know, we have made incredible headway "there.". And I think in the end it is going to be about, you know, like it has been for a large degree always been about individual experiences one-to-one. Um and the other thing um you know as I was just saying to someone, that I think, you know, if we can look at things from less of a, of a racial, uh of a racial bent. Uh, and that's everyone you know uh and more towards a kind of you know what's good for, for everybody, what's good for the state. Clearly the flag was not conducive for growth uh to a better national public image. You know just to from--not just from a human standpoint, you know, we know that, but you know even from a business standpoint, you know, it's was just, you know it's one of those things. So I think, you know, as we grow up uh as, as a state, as a school, we will start looking at you know, African-Americans and whites, what is best for, for us? You know as a state and as a university and all of that will work itself out.

DRM: Where would we be without James Meredith?

KD: Nowhere. Um, I think that eventually someone would have come along uh, but who knows when, when that might have been. You know someone who was willing to do that. And you know, I can't, I can't even imagine that because you know, looking back on it he, to do what he did for longer than, than a week, a day, and he did it for, for two years. Um, it's really hard to, to imagine, And it would have had to be someone who, who was willing to do something like that alone. And that's, you know, it takes a certain kind of person to, you know, say what you will, to do that. You know, without uh being able to go back to you know to your group from the movement, or, or whatever, but just to be alone in your struggle fighting the fight,

you know, outer and inner, every day. So um, you know, I often tell people, you know, certainly with Meredith but with, with a lot of folks in, in our history, you know it's a debt we can never repay no matter how much success we, we have as individuals or as a community we can never repay that.

DRM: Is James Meredith a hero?

KD: He is a hero. He is a hero. Um, absolutely.

DRM: He's unpredictable...

KD: Yes!

DRM: Was he like that was did the experience make him like that?

KD: Um from what I have read there has always been that streak in him, honestly. Um, and I think, you know, it's just like with a lot of people we call heroes. Uh, you know, feet of clay. You, it doesn't take away from, from what they did that most of us would be afraid to do. Okay, it doesn't take away from that. But I think that um you know clearly he was always, yeah, a guy who marched to a different drummer, let's say that. Um, so, um you know and I, I think that, that his history and, and you know how he lives, lives his life from what did he after that reflects that. Uh, but still it doesn't take away from, from what he did. I think those are two separate, separate things.

DRM: What did the University represent to you when you were in high school?

KD: Um what it represented? You know what? I hadn't really thought a lot about it, to be honest. Um, you know, I was just trying to make my way and, and figure out what to do. Um you know I knew in sort of a, a almost a visceral sense you know just from thing that I, that I had heard. Um, you know I certainly knew what happened here. Um not even all of the detail then. You know some things you know you just heard about and you knew, okay, stay away from that, that kind of thing. Uh, but I really um, you know, I didn't know a lot of the, you know, of the details, you know.

DRM: Did your momma worry about your coming to Ole Miss?

KD: I think she did. I think she did a little bit. Um but I think she you know, she trusted my judgment, and at that time, you know, remember that I went to segregated schools for two years. In third grade, schools were integrated and um you know we had been through that. And we had been through that uh you know fairly recently when you think about it. And I think having gone through that I think she, you know, I'm sure--it certainly crossed her mind because of the history. But I think it gave her some comfort that you know it could be okay. And so, you know my goal, was very clear, you know. I wanted to become a journalist I wanted to uh,

you know to, to get out in the world and hopefully uh you know become a better writer uh all that “make the world a better place” all that you know, the things that, that you think about when you’re 17, 18. So uh I felt that this was the place to do it, but that, that was it.

DRM: What about the new university mascot?

KD: Um, I like the bear. You know I think the bear is going to take some, some getting used to. Uh, whether you know however you felt about the symbolism I think that uh a lot of people would argue that Colonel Rebel had personality. Okay? So it’s going to be a matter of um how you give that bear personality, because right now I think, uh you know and again maybe I’m coming at it from my, my marketing background [laughs]. I think for a lot of people maybe the bear is just a bear. You know, I, I gotta, I think he’s got to go from being “Just a bear” to being, you know, Ole Miss--the “Ole Miss Bear!” The special bear somehow. Um, and I think, I think that is going to take some, some time.