

Denise Crews

University of Virginia

Class of 1992

Molly Owens: Alright, perfect. So, I have about 20 questions. Let's see, the first one is: tell me a few things about yourself, like your family, job, things that bring you joy, that you like to do.

Denise's iPad: Okay, I am currently the director of income and asset building services, very long title, at Commonwealth Catholic Charities, it's a nonprofit. I am in the housing arena, so I work with low-income individuals, do financial literacy counseling, homeless prevention, and that type of activity. I've been doing that for the last 21 years. I'm a mom of twins. One of my children went to UVA, so he's a legacy, the other one went to Duke, we won't say anything about her [laughter], but they're 26. And I've always loved UVA, always been a wahoo since I was in sixth grade or so.

Molly Owens: Awesome, let's see, the second question has a few different parts to it, so the overall thing is what is your UVA story, and the first part is how did you decide to go to UVA?

Denise's iPad: Okay, it's a very interesting story. I attended an all-female private girl's school near an all-boys school in Lynchburg, Virginia, and I was a huge sports person and so first, there was Ralph Sampson, I heard about Ralph Sampson and attended a lot of UVA basketball games, so he became my idol until the sixth grade and I said, "Now that's where I want to go to school, that's where I'm going to go to school." And as I got older and to high school, I knew about the academic excellence that UVA had and said that's exactly where I want to go. Ironically, since attended a small private girl's school, my college counselor thought I should attend a smaller school. There are only 100 students in my school from grade six through 12. And so, she thought I would be overwhelmed attending the university, and so I went against everything in her eyes, because I got into Greensboro College and a couple of others, Mary Baldwin, you know, a couple smaller schools, and I applied to UVA because I've always wanted to go, that's why I'm going to go. And so, I was able to get in, and she and I have remained friends throughout the years, her daughter lives in Durham, and so when we took my daughter down, she apologized and she said, "you know, as a college counselor I should not have said do not apply. I'm glad you did and I'm glad you didn't listen to me."

Molly Owens: Yeah, I have a couple friends with the same thing who go here, and they had their guidance counselors say things like, "I don't know, that seems like too much," and then they got in and really liked it, so.

Denise's iPad: The hard part was staying in, the easy part was getting in.

Molly Owens: Mhmm, exactly. What did you do when you were a student at UVA, like what were you involved in?

Denise's iPad: I was involved in several extracurricular activities. I was part of Black Voices, I was part of - I actually drove, they don't do this anymore, but there was an escort van so people wouldn't have to walk home at night when the buses stop running, so I would do that a couple of days a week. I worked for the Cavalier Daily, I worked on Corks and Curls, so I did a couple things.

Molly Owens: Nice, did you notice if women were encouraged or discouraged to join extracurriculars, and were some of them more open and welcoming than other ones were?

Denise's iPad: I didn't find that in the extracurricular world, I will tell you in the academic setting and a couple of my classes I thought it was interesting, especially coming from an all-female institution for seven years, finding my voice and then sitting in a class where there were gentlemen and you know, look around the room and the females weren't talking, I was like, "why aren't you speaking up, and we have a voice to." I did have one professor in an English class that would call on the gentleman more than the females, until I called him out on that, but we have an opinion, too, and he didn't realize he was doing it.

Molly Owens: Yeah, let's see, what was your Greek life experience like? Either being in it, or just encounters with it.

Denise's iPad: Greek life, again, growing up at a private school, I was the only person of color there, so that was another twist to things, and so I had associated with the Greek Life prior to going to UVA. And then race began to play a factor, in all honesty, after I became a student, and so I was kind of forced to choose, and that was very hard for me to have to choose which world I wanted to be in. And so, I became a Sigma dove, I was a dove for a year, and then I just realized Greek life just wasn't for me. Now later on in life, I am all about community service and giving back, so I am part of the Divine Nine now, I did pledge again on the graduate level, so I'm a Delta. But it wasn't so much for the social scene versus the community services, that's what I'm about.

Molly Owens: That make sense, let's see, what was your favorite memory at UVA?

Denise's iPad: My favorite memory at UVA...the friendships. I still have friends to this day who I met on the day first day of school and we're close, more like family than friends, and we like going to some of the games, so that was kind of awesome.

Molly Owens: Yeah, that's my favorite part too. Let's see, what was a transformative moment for you when you were at UVA?

Denise's iPad: I would have to say, my second year. First year, you know, I kind of got caught up in the party thing with a lot of Rugby Road and thought I could still do the type of stuff that I did. I never had to study, and I figured I can do it, I didn't know UVA was very different. And coming back that fall, I attended summer school, so I had had to attend summer school and I really began to see that I would have to work to stay in, and that was something that I didn't

want to lose. And so, really figuring out how I was going to make this work, and having these skills given to me and these tools given to me. I will say that was one of the things that I applaud at UVA, they tested me and found I have a learning disability and didn't know it. So, they provided me with the tools and the resources to be successful, and we didn't know that until second year fall semester. Because I was trying to take down every single note in a class and I realized that I can't do that, that doesn't work, and then we learned that I don't take the standardized test well. So essentially, I can read a book, I can remember a whole lecture and what happened around me, but when I put it in a different format, my brain doesn't work that way. So, I really think that was when that switch went off to say, okay, it's not me being not smart enough to be here, there was legitimately something wrong. That's what I think made me initially - I taught school prior to this world of nonprofit, I taught at a private school, but to see that there are different ways of learning, and that's across the board. When you're in the workforce, people get things differently, their work ethics are different, so you have to find their skills. I still feel like I'm a teacher now, what skills do my staff have that I can amplify, where do they need help, with what kind of tools, what kind of resources, how can I make them understand, so I think that was a very transformative moment at UVA for me, my second year.

Molly Owens: Mhmm, what was the most challenging thing for you about UVA?

Denise's iPad: Reality versus perception. And again, this was from 1988 to 1992 when I attended. And then my senior year, you know, again being forced to choose my world, that was very hard. And also losing some of my voice in the beginning was kind of hard, so that was challenging. Now, I came from a strong, independent female school where nothing will stop me, and then I would run up against people at college and that was tough.

Molly Owens: Yeah, that's tough, let's see, tell me about a woman at UVA who inspires you, either when you were there or who's here now.

Denise's iPad: I would say that it would have been my advisor, she was very good for me. I majored in African American Studies and History. She was very good to give me the foundation and I admire her and the struggles that she faced. I knew there were some obstacles that she faced, and she ended up taking a sabbatical my fourth year and I actually ended up with Julian Bond as my advisor the last year I was there, which was a consolation prize [laughter]. But yeah, she was very inspirational and very influential for me. And I do have, you know some of the athletes that don't get the recognition that the men do, and having played sports throughout high school - one of my friends actually roomed with Dawn Staley for the summer, and seeing the accomplishments that she's made on the national level has really been inspirational, some of those ceilings so.

Molly Owens: Yeah, she's awesome. Let's see, what relationships did you form with other women while you were at UVA and did you find it easy to make those connections?

Denise's iPad: Absolutely, finding that commonality with several other women in my first summer, I ended up staying with some of the female basketball players and then I injured my

knee, so I was over at U-Hall a lot, so I got to really see them in a different light. And then again, the strong African American influences that we had with our Black Voices group and really finding that community very opening and welcoming.

Molly Owens: What was the presence of women's groups and movements on Grounds like?

Denise's iPad: I think it was more focused on race versus women in my in my little edge of the world, it was more about divestment in South Africa, equal rights, you know, having the board of visitors divest. But you know, I know things have changed, but I think it was more of a unifying force within the African American community versus the women versus men.

Molly Owens: Yeah, that makes sense. And let's see, how many courses did you take at UVA that were taught by female professors, and could you talk a little about the types of courses they taught? Like were there more of them in certain departments than other departments and things like that.

Denise's iPad: Yeah, I think I probably had a few classes that had women teaching and they were liberal arts classes. And of course, my African American studies, one that was generic and then some upper level. But yeah, for the most part they were more liberal arts, my studio art, art history, was taught by a female. But most of my courses were men.

Molly Owens: Yeah, that's kind of like mine, right now, I'm a chemistry major, so I've got a lot of male professors and just a few female one sprinkled in there. Okay, what were your experiences with sexism or misogyny on Grounds like?

Denise's iPad: You know, I'm thinking back and - I don't know if this was a good thing or bad thing - there really wasn't much. Again, from my perspective in that timeline.

Molly Owens: Was there an open LGBT presence when you went to UVA?

Denise's iPad: There was, and they would have open displays of affection on Grounds, by the Rotunda. It wasn't as supported as it is now. You know, there were still people who were afraid to come out and so forth and so on, they were shunned, and I think that's just a lack of understanding on people's parts.

Molly Owens: Yeah, for sure. Alright, did you feel pressure to go into a certain field or avoid a certain field while you were in school?

Denise's iPad: No, I didn't. I know some of my friends felt the pressure, you know, some of them were chemistry majors, pre-med and there was a lot of pressure, and some of them felt unfounded pressure. They also thought they had it harder than some of their male counterparts, I don't know if you feel that.

Molly Owens: Yeah, I know I noticed that in some ways, like I feel like I've got to work extra hard to be listened to or respected in my classes versus a guy just because they don't take me as seriously sometimes, it gets pretty annoying.

Denise's iPad: I've actually had a couple of friends, we talked about how they would spend twice as long on stuff, saying that they had felt the need, because even some of our TAs would overlook the female students.

Molly Owens: Yeah, definitely. Did you notice a disparity in the population of men versus women in your major?

Denise's iPad: I will say that my major was more female. Actually, Afro Am, but then you could concentrate in History, English, other things, and I did history, and they were more women, ironically, under the History major.

Molly Owens: Let's see, do you know of any efforts that UVA has made since you graduated to try to make their classes more inclusive?

Denise's iPad: I do that when my son was there, he finished in 2016, you know, all the stuff going around in Charlottesville, man. I think they tried to make it more inclusive, just from what I try to read, you know. They tried, you know, the fact that we had a female President, even though they did try to run her out of town, I give kudos for them to at least opening the door.

Molly Owens: Yeah, let's see, what was the relationship or hookup culture like during your time at UVA?

Denise's iPad: Probably pretty much the way it is now. You know, I will say it does give me pause when I talked to some of my former classmates that had a really rough time with that culture of - I don't want to say date rape, but basically that's what it was. Just their experience, and to this day they refuse to return. And that makes me sad that they didn't feel supported enough to come forward then.

Molly Owens: Mmhmm yeah, that's awful, and kind of in the same vein the next question is was there any talk about consent or respect on campus, and if there was, was it helpful?

Denise's iPad: You had that one during orientation week, that one little spiel, and that was it, but then people really didn't talk about it, it really wasn't talked about. Not like it was in the most recent years, but like I said, I've talked to a couple people that, you know - I go back fairly often, to Black Alumni Weekend and stuff, and to reunions and homecomings and football games, and I had a great experience. And when I talked to some of my friends on social media, they're like, "I could never go back," and then that's when they start to uncover things that, you know, certain things happened to them and they didn't feel like they could report.

Molly Owens: Yeah, that's just awful, and the fact that they can't even like come back, like that's just terrible. And still now actually, we mostly do the same thing, where it's just at the beginning of each year, we have a little module on consent, but I feel like if something were to happen, I still wouldn't know what to do. It's not clear what the university responses are, which is something that they really should work on.

Denise's iPad: Yeah, I totally agree, especially with all the news media coverage we've had in the past with females missing and things, I think just more education and learning to say no. I've talked to some young men, like I said my son graduated 2016, who also agree. It's just a culture that is not really looked upon as, you know, you have to talk about it, and there's so much alcohol involved.

Molly Owens: Yeah, for sure. Let's see, what was your journey after leaving UVA?

Denise's iPad: After UVA I got a teaching job in Pennsylvania, so I actually taught my major, which is very interesting, so I taught African American studies, History and English from the Black perspective, and I did that at a private boarding school, and then I left there and went to one in Massachusetts where I was Director of Diversity. And then after my twins were born, I had a couple of health complications and so I moved back to Virginia had a couple of different types of jobs but ended up in this nonprofit world and housing world for the last 20 years, just giving back. There was a situation that landed me basically homeless and eight months pregnant, and so figuring out how to, you know - I was like, "I have a degree, I need to figure out on my own how to get back to where I need to be" and so fighting my way back, becoming the assistant director of a nonprofit and have been in this for almost 20 years now. To give back to community, to see that a lot of people are one paycheck away from being homeless, to help give somebody a hand up, not a handout, or be in that service industry. And the cause for affordable housing, how there's such a disparity with women and pay. So those are some of the champion causes that I do now, and I've been blessed that my role was moved during the pandemic to Richmond. And seeing the disparity and listening to some of the stories I hear where this pandemic really shed a light on a lot of the frontline workers who are not able to afford to sustain themselves or to feed their family. And how can we as a society change those type of things, you know, and I look at how they were saying how women, especially minority women, are like 50 cents to the dollar for men. It's just equal pay.

Molly Owens: Yeah, it's insane.

Denise's iPad: This is the year of the woman so, [laughter] yeah, that's all I'm gonna say.

Molly Owens: Exactly, is there something that you learned at UVA that you apply to your life now?

Denise's iPad: I would say determination, and there's no problem that doesn't have a solution, you just have to figure it out. I think about the independence that it taught me, and I think just being dropped in the middle of Charlottesville, 18 years old, to figure it out where one class had

more people than my entire high school. So that that alone was like, wow, you're not Kansas anymore [laughter], and figuring out how to communicate with a world bigger than myself.

Molly Owens: Yeah, for sure. Okay, what does the UVA alumni community mean to you, and how have fellow alumni affected your life or career, or just journey in general?

Denise's iPad: I always talk about UVA, I still have those ties, I still give back, I will work with the admissions office. Like I said, my son's a legacy, so I was constantly back in 2016. I'm a lifetime member of the Alumni Association, I did congratulatory calls, you know, I bleed orange and blue [laughter]. The network that we have across the country, in the world, has been amazing. I still reach out to certain people. I will tell you that a lot of my class has turned 50 during the pandemic, and so we had a Zoom party, and we did a surprise party for Dawn Staley when she turned 50, that was so much fun just to see so many of my friends and folks that I had lived with who I hadn't seen in forever. And so that was kind of cool, to still be able to keep that connection with them after all this time, so they've been influential and we will still talk. They still check on us, you know, we all make sure we're all okay. We've got so many groups, I'm all connected on LinkedIn and things so, yeah, UVA is ingrained in my life.

Molly Owens: That's awesome! Let's see, in your opinion, what's the legacy of women at UVA?

Denise's iPad: I think the legacy is changing the "old boy network," and showing that women are as capable as men. And that we're here to stay and we're not going anywhere.

Molly Owens: Yeah, my mom went to UVA too, and when I interviewed her she said similar stuff, like it was old boy network, and I was just really annoyed.

Denise's iPad: Yeah, and we have something to contribute. And it doesn't have to be - we're just as capable in any field, not just those they think are designated for females, like nursing or those "safe" fields of study. We're the doctors, we're the lawyers, we're the CEOs, we're just as competent as the engineers as anybody else.

Molly Owens: Exactly. If you could impart piece of advice to a female student who's on Grounds today, what would you tell her?

Denise's iPad: Embrace the experience, try new things, don't be afraid to try something. There's always a lesson in failures, so try something you've never done before, and never take no for an answer.

Molly Owens: I love that advice. Let's see, is there anything related to women's history at UVA that you'd like to learn more about?

Denise's iPad: I would, I attended one of the sessions in April where we talked about the impact of women and the integration and all of that, I would say more along the...not just the Arts and Sciences side, I would say like Comm school, what was happening in that? The law school, you

know, to really learn more about that aspect because, yes, I was part of my class, but to learn about the other schools would be interesting to me.

Molly Owens: Yeah, that'd be super interesting. Alright, last question, what do you think is the biggest difference in terms of your experience at UVA and what it's like now in 2021?

Denise's iPad: Diversity, I would have to say diversity. And that people are more accepting now of all walks of life versus back then. When I walk on Grounds it's a totally different feel than 88 to 92. So, you know, my son embraced things and did things that I never would have done when I was there. So he was part of various organizations and I was like, you know, I wish we had that. Like the pep band is a prime example. The pep band is totally different than when I was there, I wouldn't even call it a band back then, but just those activities.

Molly Owens: Alright, awesome! Well, thank you for answering all my questions.

Denise's iPad: Well, thank you, it was a pleasure, I'm so excited!