

JOHN BRANAM

Mame Warren,
Interviewer

Warren: This is Mame Warren. Today is the thirteenth of May, 1996. I'm at Washington and Lee University, Lexington Virginia, with John Branam. We don't know each other at all, so I'm going to start off by asking you some really silly basic questions.

Branam: All right.

Warren: Where are you from?

Branam: Corvallis, Oregon.

Warren: That's right. You did say Oregon, and that was part of why I was intrigued by you, because I haven't talked to anybody from that far away. What's your major?

Branam: Politics.

Warren: Well, that falls into place and makes sense with what you just told me you've been reading. I should have been able to figure that out. So how did you get here from Oregon? What was the attraction?

Branam: Well, it sort of happened overnight. I was all set to go to University of Oregon on a politics scholarship, following my brother's set tradition, and then I was at a New Year's Eve party with a good friend of mine my senior year, and he was a freshman at Washington and Lee, and we had been friends in all of our political organizations in high school, and he said, "Well, do you have anything from Washington and Lee?"

I said, "Well, I think so." So I applied late.

They called me at about 5:30 or 6:00 a.m. on a Wednesday and said, "Would you like to fly out tomorrow?"

I was scheduled to go to a Shakespearian festival for the weekend, but I said, "Well, can I keep the frequent flier miles?"

They said, "Sure."

Warren: [Laughter] Let's get our priorities straight.

Branam: So I flew first class out to W&L, and it snowed that night, so when I came to campus from Roanoke it was absolutely gorgeous. I came in about 10 p.m., and I helped this friend of mine write a paper on *Hamlet*, and then I went for a walk on the Colonnade and fell in love. The next day I went and visited the Politics Department and found the professors to be fantastic, and so it was a done deal, overnight.

Warren: Were you offered a scholarship?

Branam: I was offered the opportunity to apply, but actually I think I'm probably one of--I'm paying my entire way here. I'm probably the only black student that is.

Warren: And can I be nose-y and ask why you think that is? There are several questions I have to do with that. First of all, to do with you, why do you think that is?

Branam: Oh, why do I think that is? Well, I mean simply--well, first of all, I think there is only one, maybe two, black students that are here on academic scholarship, and the rest are on financial aid or some sort of a creative package. But I think that Washington and Lee has put forth some money in a financial aid package even for those black students who probably don't need it. For me, I did not apply for financial aid because I didn't need it, and I didn't want to take the money from someone else because there is the politics career, and so I have to sort of be careful.

Warren: You were planning ahead. You're very smart, but I knew that before I asked you to do this interview. So I'm intrigued by--well, I think we're both

intrigued by the whole situation here for minority students. Did you attempt to get an honor scholarship?

Branam: I applied for one of the politics through the Politics Department. They offer a few scholarships. It didn't bother me that I didn't get it. I'm sure it was a very fair process, but having spent \$120,000 of my own money, not my parents' money, and having felt like I've tried to contribute to Washington and Lee in ways that exceed the average student, the normal student, I probably should have tried to get some money. But I think as far as the process of applying for financial aid and how that works with the minority students here, I think that W&L was very fair, and to that degree, I think they go the extra mile in trying to recruit black students by providing some financial incentive for them to come. But as any college-bound black high school student knows, their skin color is an asset, and I think that they should use it and most do use it to their advantage. But it will be difficult for Washington and Lee to recruit qualified black students, because anyone who is good enough to get in here is probably good enough to get into another institution which has probably a more famous name as well.

Warren: What could Washington and Lee do to make themselves more attractive? If you fell in love with this place, why wouldn't other people fall in love with this place?

Branam: Well, I think that in addition to being from Oregon, I'm also different from the majority of the minority students here because I come from a predominantly white community and neighborhood, although Oregon State University is there and provides a lot of diversity. So I've grown up with diversity. But when I was thinking about universities that I wanted to attend, I did have a few of the black colleges in mind, but realized quickly that it would be very difficult for me to go into that type of a learning institution. Similarly, there are a lot of minority students here that are from, you know, D.C., predominantly black

neighborhoods. So for them to come down here, it's a very difficult adaptation. So for me the transition was a smooth one.

What can Washington and Lee do? I think that there are several things. First of all, Washington and Lee, I think, is committed to getting black students, but I'm not impressed with their ability to produce successful black students, and that doesn't mean successful in terms of who goes out and gets the best job, but successful students in terms of those who, when they leave the institution, feel like they have a love for it, who feel like their four years have been productive, useful, helpful. I think the majority of the white students feel that way, but I think that if you took a poll of the thirty-five or forty of us that are here, most have an uneasy relationship.

So Washington and Lee can specifically, I think--well, they need to have programs, a curriculum, professors, who represent ideas that the majority of blacks are interested in, for instance, having a Black Studies major, because it institutionalizes and legitimizes black history, black culture, and it offers a different perspective on America. Washington and Lee has tried, I think, to stay away from looking at that perspective. We've offered the courses, but we offer them every other year or every third year. The professors who teach them are here as visiting professors or they're assistant professors but they're rarely, if ever, tenured. So when you have minority students who come here to visit and they're serious students and maybe they even want to be physics majors and engineering majors, but they look at signs that will tell them that the institution is committed to a different perspective, looking at things in different ways, I think that they are oftentimes disappointed. And from day one, Washington and Lee has already lost the competition to attract qualified black students.

Warren: It looks that way to me. I think that's very fair assessment. One of the things that I heard you say at the talk or the meeting where we first met was that you belonged to a fraternity but you left it. Can you tell me about that experience?

Branam: Well, let's see. I think there are now fifteen fraternities here, and I believe six of them, only six out of the fifteen, have ever had a black student. I, fortunately, was able to get into a fraternity. I say fortunately not because I needed it necessarily, but because I think it provided a way for me to get into the Washington and Lee social structure, which the vast majority of blacks are kept out of. So I think I more or less enjoyed my two years there, but as I was coming to the end of my sophomore year, I had to make a decision based on my own personal finances and also based upon my experience at W&L, and I figured that the students who were my friends in the fraternity were going to be my friends outside the fraternity.

At the time I was working very hard in writing articles for the newspapers about a Black Studies major, was pretty vocal on campus, and the particular fraternity that I was in, I think, was sort of having an identity crisis, and I was probably their most--outstanding is not the right word, but visual, I guess, member of the fraternity in the sort of Washington and Lee social structure, and so when I started presenting these radical ideas for Washington and Lee, they were being closely identified with a particular fraternity, and members of that fraternity became uncomfortable, and so the relationship between me and them became a bit more hostile. So in the end, partly I felt that I just needed to do my own thing and look at Washington and Lee from another perspective. You know, I've had the best of both worlds. Very few students have done both, and I think that it's because it really is a totally different perspective, and that's what I value most, is looking at things from different perspectives.

So I guess I got lucky. Had things been better in the fraternity, I probably would not have left, or if I didn't have the financial constraints, I probably would not have left, but things were not that way. So I was fortunate in the end.

Warren: So where do you live now?

Branam: I live in the Chavis House and was house manager and then doubled as the president of the Minority Student Association.

Warren: Tell me how Chavis House works.

Branam: Well, the Chavis House really serves two functions, and oftentimes I think they're misunderstood by the student body. The Chavis House has a building. It's named after John Chavis, who, I think, was one of the first black students, if not the first black student, to attend this institution. It's simply housing for Washington and Lee students. It doesn't cater to black students, but it has been a place where black students have traditionally lived. Last year there were two white students, one Jewish fellow and another just Anglo-Saxon, I guess, I don't know. But it also serves as the place where the Minority Student Association has their meetings. Very rarely do white students come over, but the door is always open, and we have, over the years, tried to attract a more diverse group that will at least come for parties or whatever. That's pretty much the way it works.

Warren: So does Chavis House have parties like fraternities have parties?

Branam: Well, we have in the past. Because it is university housing and it does house underclassmen, there is an alcohol rule. And so that has, I think, limited the ability--or not the ability, but the successfulness of Washington and Lee Minority Student Association parties, because as we all know, most students here don't want to go to a non-alcoholic party. We have held parties with other fraternities and at other places, but it's very difficult to get non-black students to come. So I guess we've been marginally successful.

Warren: Is that important? Is that a big frustration? This does seem to be a party school.

Branam: Yeah. I think different students would answer that--well, they would obviously answer that in different ways. I think, for the most part, black students at Washington and Lee are very frustrated because, on the one hand, they want to feel independent enough, they want to be able to say confidently that they're going to be successful here with or without the positive reinforcement from white students at Washington and Lee, but the reality is that if you're not happy in a place for four years, if you feel a bit of hostility, you're not going to be as successful. So I think that it's definitely a sore spot for black students that they're not able to integrate and put on parties that white students will come to, whereas black students oftentimes do go to the fraternity parties, but I think most black students on the surface will say, "No, it's fine because we don't want them there anyways. They don't want us at their parties, so we don't want them at our parties."

We have done some joint parties with VMI. When we do have parties, we do solicit students from the other--you know, Virginia Tech, UVA, JMU. But I think that in the long run and from a broader perspective, it is problematic because Washington and Lee is a very social institution and the reality is that the world is social, and if you don't have the skills to go between races and backgrounds and religions at a closed institution, a very family-like institution that Washington and Lee is, then you're not going to be successful, most likely, in the business world. So I think that that problem hurts both black students and white students at W&L.

Warren: Are there black women living at Chavis House?

Branam: No, there are only three students, including myself. But it's alternated over the years. Last year there were three guys. The year before that, there were women. So they're trying to make it coed, but just simply the structure of the house makes it difficult, bathrooms, things like that.

Warren: Which house is it?

Branam: Ten Lee Avenue. It's the brick house sort of almost diagonal from Chi Psi Fraternity.

Warren: Which is the old Ann Smith School?

Branam: Yes. It's the brick one diagonal from there.

Warren: On the corner?

Branam: No. That's the Career Services, the old Sigma Chi House. Then there's a white house next to it. Then there's another brick house. it's perpendicular to the alley way.

Warren: I know where you mean.

Branam: Gorgeous house from the inside.

Warren: So the University owns it?

Branam: Oh, yeah.

Warren: And how long has it been in existence as Chavis House? Were you here when that happened?

Branam: When it was named Chavis House?

Warren: Yes.

Branam: Oh, no. Probably at least mid-seventies.

Warren: I was just curious about who chose the name, who decided who it was named for.

Branam: I'm not sure. Of course it is sort of ironic. You know, we had Benjamin Chavis, who is the great-grandson, I believe, of John Chavis. Ben was here last year.

Warren: No, I don't know this. Tell me about this.

Branam: You know Ben Chavis, as in Ben Chavis.

Warren: Tell me. This is for posterity.

Branam: Ben Chavis, who was the former director of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] before he was indicted on

charges of taking NAACP's money to pay off a paternal suit, he was here last year as a speaker and came over to the Chavis House for a reception. So that was nice. I believe it's his great-grandfather who was the first black student to graduate from W&L. So that's where the name came from.

Warren: Speaking of speakers, do you get to bring people in very often?

Branam: Well, yes and no. I guess it depends on the size of the budget and how many speakers we want to bring in. If we want to bring several low budget, we can, and we've done that in the past. This year I sort of utilized my iron hand in the MSA, and we went for bringing Cornell West and put together a coalition of organizations, again out of default. Contact did not want to provide money for us, and so we sort of had to build a coalition of Dean of Students Office, Office of the President, C school, Department of Religion, law school, SAB. You know, it sort of goes on, to put together the \$14,000 to bring Cornell West, and I think it was an overwhelmingly successful event, and I think that it helped to improve the image of the MSA on campus. I think that next year I will definitely work with them to bring another good speaker, probably Skip Gates.

Warren: Really?

Branam: Oh, sure. Sure, yeah.

Warren: That would be great.

Branam: But we just switched leadership at the MSA, and so the president and vice president are both female and will be sophomores, rising sophomores, and so they don't know a whole lot about Washington and Lee yet, so I'm going to continue to work with them a little bit from D.C., you know, helping in whatever ways.

Probably bring Congressman John Lewis, as well, down here.

Warren: Do you have connections there?

Branam: Yeah. He's a friend.

Warren: So what will you be doing in Washington?

Branam: Well, I'll be working next year for the Higher Achievement Program. It's a program for underprivileged but academically successful kids who tend to be black students because of the areas that we test, which is virtually just inner-city D.C. So we'll take those kids. Once they test into the program, if they want to be admitted, we'll take them. They make a fifteen-month commitment, and we run a center for those kids. I'll be one of the center directors. There's seven centers, and we will take them two nights a week for three hours a night and bring in volunteer tutors who are committed to at least fifteen weeks of tutoring straight, and we match them up, one-on-one or one-on-two, and we try to accelerate their learning so that they can test into the private schools. In fact, we have had students from D.C. who have been students at Washington and Lee. So it's proof that the program works.

Warren: That's exciting.

Branam: Yeah, it is. It's very exciting. It's going to be great.

Warren: You're talking about the Minority Student Association. There are other kinds of minorities at this place. Do you reach out to other minorities?

Branam: No. I'm ashamed to say no. Part of it, though, is structural, and I think Washington and Lee sort of inhibits our ability, actually. Part of it is there's not enough time and not enough of an effort made on the part of students like myself to include other minority students. I think actually I'm mostly talking about Asian students here, because we have a few Asian students and a few Jamaican. I don't even know if we have any Hispanic or Mexican. I'm not sure. But when Washington and Lee talks about minority students, they're clearly talking about black students. They keep Asian students, which they qualify as international students, who live in the International House, which is next to the John Chavis House, which is for blacks. So they really do keep them separate.

At the beginning of the year, we did have some joint parties. We had some joint dinners on Sunday evenings, but although the experience between all of the

minorities is similar because they're at a common institution, still they're coming from totally different backgrounds, and I felt like, as president of the Minority Student Association, that my primary and our primary responsibility was to the black students because the international students also had their own program. If there were more time and more facilities available, I think that it would be great to incorporate both groups and sort of make one large group, but the experiences are totally different. The problems are different. Most of the Asian students do pretty well academically. They're also only here oftentimes for one year as exchange students, whereas black students don't do as well academically and they're here for four years.

Warren: Are there Asian-American students?

Branam: I can think of one, but I don't really know.

Warren: I haven't had conversations with these people so I was assuming the people I was seeing were Asian-Americans, but you're saying they're truly Asian over here.

Branam: Yes. Oh, yes. They do come over for a year usually. I would say of the six Asian students I know, one is Asian-American. The rest are all exchange students.

Warren: I see. I didn't realize who I was looking at.

Branam: So different problems.

Warren: Sure. It's a different issue.

Branam: Yeah, much different.

Warren: That lovely letter in the *Trident* this week really made me wonder about the homosexual students and how they cope as a minority.

Branam: That's almost a more frustrating problem for me, because I'm not homosexual but I do have family members who are. I've grown up with it. To me, the problems that homosexuals face are identical to the problems that blacks have faced in America. I'm continually amazed that academics or even just ordinary

citizens don't realize the common themes and sufferings of the two groups, and there are other groups as well, but our treatment--society's treatment and Washington and Lee's treatment--of gay and lesbian students is identical to their treatment of minority students, black students. And at Washington and Lee, we are extremely homophobic and proud of it. I don't see that changing anywhere in the near future. I think things will be better for every group before they'll be better for homosexuals.

Warren: The *Princeton Guide to Colleges* says this place is the most homogenous place around, and, of course, in my eye it certainly looks that way, but it's remarkable to me that it's down there in black and white.

Branam: That's right. It's here. It's official.

Warren: And one other student I spoke with said--and, of course, he's coming from a majority point of view--that that's the wonderfulness of this place and that if you don't fit in, you leave, and you're living proof that that's not true. And there are any number of people who are living proof that it's not true, but the vast majority of students here think that that is true.

Branam: Yeah. You know, I think that is the perfect illustration of a student who misunderstands the relevance, the beauty, and the importance of Washington and Lee/tradition. Any student who comes here to an academic institution of this caliber and who comes here because of its tradition of being a white male institution, I think, comes for the wrong reasons, because although that's true, that officially has never been the goal of the institution, to remain an all-white male institution. I think, to a certain degree, unofficially, Washington and Lee has tried, obviously by bringing women here who have substantially elevated the academic excellence of Washington and Lee, I think the university tries reasonably hard to attain the expectations of excellence established by General Lee. But any student who comes here because they want to be around people who come from similar

backgrounds and who look at life in the same way shouldn't be here, because that's not what getting an education is about, in my opinion, and if they thought about it, they would probably come to the same conclusion. But I think very few students actually think about what is the meaning of academics and an education. I think most students who come here come here because they want to go to a school that has a good name and who will get them a good job which will make a fair amount of money. That's why most students come, and their parents like it. Those are all the wrong reasons, in my opinion, to choose an academic institution. I could be wrong.

Warren: Well, it's their opinion.

Branam: Yeah. It's their opinion.

Warren: And there seem to be an awful lot of them who feel that way. What about social events? Fancy Dress?

Branam: Problematic.

Warren: Tell me.

Branam: Oh, well, let's see in what context do you mean. The black experience or just what does Fancy Dress mean to Washington and Lee, whatever? Fancy Dress, for me, has been one of the neatest experiences at W&L because my ex-girlfriend of seven years has always come out for Fancy Dress, and so it's been a special time for me.

Warren: Come from Oregon?

Branam: California. She's graduating from Santa Clara University. What it means to the university, I think it's a great event and it's fun. I think it actually brings students together, not physically, but it does for the institution what most institutions, pure academic experiences, do for those institutions. I guess I mean that at Washington and Lee, I think of it as a very fragmented, segregated community, and when we have a big event that brings students together, everyone

is so drunk, we all get along, is really what happens. You talk to people who, you know, when they pass you on the Colonnade would never utter a "hello" or "how are you." So it's good for the institution.

It's a really stressful time for upperclassmen women. It's a very stressful time for black students, because the majority of the weekend revolves around fraternity-based parties, and, obviously, the majority of the black students, almost the totality of black students, are not in fraternities, and so in the past we've tried to provide parties of our own to make students feel like they have the Washington and Lee experience, the Fancy Dress experience, but, you know, they're different. Our parties are different. It's more difficult. We don't have the funds that the fraternities have. We don't have the beautiful homes that they have. Most times our dates don't come from Washington and Lee, so you're not getting the common Washington and Lee experience, but I think it's still a good thing. It's neat.

Warren: Why is it stressful for upperclasswomen?

Branam: Oh, gosh. Well, I think it's stressful for all women, but particularly for upperclassmen women because Washington and Lee men, especially upperclassmen men, are--I don't know how I can say this politely--they really like underclassmen women. That's who they go for, especially for date weekends. So a lot of the upperclassmen women come here in their freshman year, have a great time, you know, all the men love them, but things really change for them sophomore, junior and senior year.

Beyond that, I guess on a more serious note, Washington and Lee obviously has severe problems with--well, their women do particularly, with visual appearances, their body weight, self-image, you know, the political problems of bulimia and anorexia. You know, Washington and Lee has consistently been voted in--oh gosh, I guess, *USA Today*, *Princeton Review* have also done some tests, they're usually in the top ten in the country for most beautiful kids, most attractive

kids, but it causes a lot of stress on the women, and it's really bizarre, because here you have some of the brightest women in the world, in the United States, brightest kids, who suffer some of the worst self-image problems possible.

You know, if you really look around and you start watching the women on campus, they're amazingly skinny, unhealthy, and if you look at the social interactions between students at Washington and Lee, especially considering our long history with "road school" girls, the social interactions are very unhealthy-- people having unprotected sex, people having casual sex, not thinking about the consequences, thinking that Washington and Lee is such a closed atmosphere that nothing's going to happen. We have a lot of problems with, not date rape, but inappropriate behavior, and alcohol is the root of the majority of the problems. Women, unfortunately, are the ones who suffer the most from these problems. The cycle perpetuates itself.

When I was a freshman, there was another freshman here, and this happened my sophomore year, and then we were just friends, you know. I was still in a monogamous relationship, and on three occasions I ended up spending the night with these women in the same bed, with no sexual contact but because they were having extreme problems feeling comfortable in that type of an environment with men. And so we were sort of working on overcoming that, believing that you can trust a guy again, they're not all going to violate you, things like that, but there are a lot of women that have that problem on this campus, unfortunately, and I think it plays out in the social structure.

Warren: I'm not surprised to hear you say that.

Branam: Yeah.

Warren: How about parties that would happen someplace like Zollman's and those kind of parties? Are you interested in going to those? Do they have an appeal?

Branam: Well, I'm not really interested in going to them, but I think in that respect I'm pretty atypical. I think I'm probably one of maybe a handful, if that, of men on this campus who've never been to a female road school, a female road school, who've never dated a Washington and Lee girl, never dated a road school girl. I've only been to Zollman's once. I probably couldn't tell you most of the fraternity names, sorority names. I try not to know them.

As far as the parties, you know, out at Zollman's and out in the country and things like that, I've been to some, and they're really fun. I mean, I have a blast at them, but there's so many problems that are associated with those parties. For one, the glaring problem is the drinking and driving. I've driven when I probably shouldn't have, but the problem is huge when you talk about parties out at Zollman's and parties out in the country. So that's one reason that I don't go out.

The other thing is, it's disgusting. If you've ever been to a party at Zollman's when it rains, you have to be pretty well blitzed to enjoy yourself. I mean, you're muddy, it's filthy, the car gets dirty, but that's pretty ridiculous. But I think that's one of the traditions about Washington and Lee that I think is neat, it's pretty harmless as long as no one drinks and drives, and people seem to enjoy it. So I think parties at Zollman's are a Washington and Lee tradition forever. But I am glad to see that they started up Live Drive again.

Warren: I need to turn the tape over.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

Warren: Tell me about Live Drive.

Branam: Live Drive. Well, actually they just got in a little bit of trouble, not really Live Drive but some of the people that were running Live Drive. Apparently there was some empty beer cans or something found in the vicinity of the Live Drive office or in the Live Drive van. As I mentioned before, unfortunately it took a death to bring Live Drive back. I think that a Live Drive and the existence of Live Drive is

sort of a microcosm of Washington and Lee's--our inability to recognize problems before they happen. Not as an institution, at least not from a financial standpoint. I mean, I think Washington and Lee does a really good job of their financial planning. Most students aren't aware of our budget breakdown, who gets paid what, but I think it's very interesting and important to see how Washington and Lee's money is spent, and I think about that, because as an alumnus, I sort of want to know where my money's going, and I'll give freely as much as I can.

But it took a student to die before it brought back Live Drive. It's taking numerous dropouts and unsuccessful terms, unsuccessful years, on the part of black students before Washington and Lee reacts with any comprehensive program. It takes a rape in the dorms before we add security locks or annual or biannual programs for women and men about sexual relationships on campus. You know, it always seems like we're reacting, from a social standpoint, we're reacting to the problems that exist.

Recently there have been a number of articles in the *Trident* and the *Phi* about the living, breathing Honor Code. The Honor Code has been one of the few areas, I think, from what I know, where the students seem to always be evaluating, thinking about the Honor Code. But even still, at Washington and Lee you can be kicked out for lying, stealing, or cheating, but you can be put on social probation for sexual misconduct. You may not even be put on social probation for keeping students of certain colors or backgrounds out of fraternity parties, and it just seems strange to me that our priorities are in that order. I can understand it because Washington and Lee is an academic institution, and the social structures sort of formulate themselves, and they come second to the academics, and so we have to maintain the academics, but I really think that if we are in the business of producing honorable people, not just honorable men, and intelligent people, people who are going to contribute good things to society, then we need to sort of think about how

we should be behaving, not just in the classroom. But once again, it seems as though we're reacting. We're not being proactive. So Live Drive, we're reactive.

Warren: Can you talk about the student dying and what happened on campus at that time?

Branam: Well, I didn't know the student. I certainly knew of him. Students were really saddened by the death, not surprised. In fact, I can recall a number of conversations this year and probably last year, casual conversations, where, you know, we'd be talking about death or something, and it seems like every class in high school and every class in college has one student who dies before their time from an unfortunate incident. I myself had said before that it's surprising we haven't had more, if you consider the level of drinking and driving at Washington and Lee.

I think that the death really showed one of the strengths of Washington and Lee, which I probably don't talk about enough, and that is a sense of family and support that the professors provide. The professors go beyond their academic responsibilities, and I heard that in a number of classes, including one of my own, the professor sort of--you know, we brought it out into the open, which I think is good. We talked about it a little bit before going back to academics. The students--I think we filled two buses. The university President Elrod would have done anything to ease the pain of the student's death. I'm not at a state institution, but I don't think you get that at many other places.

Warren: What do you mean filled two buses?

Branam: With students going up to the funeral in Maryland.

Warren: In the snow?

Branam: Yeah.

Warren: They went anyway?

Branam: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Other people were worried about that, too. You can say that maybe perhaps they were foolish, considering the liability of taking two busloads of kids, but on the flip side you can say, you know, they're really committed to the student, the student who died, the family of that student, and the students who wanted to go. We found a way to make it possible. And you never heard anyone, faculty or administrator, worried about the cost. Maybe that would happen everywhere, but I don't believe it to be the case. Washington and Lee really cares about its students, and I really feel fortunate for that.

Warren: Let's talk about the faculty. Let's talk about the faculty as it is. I presume you have frustration that there aren't more minorities on the faculty. How does the faculty serve the minority students? Are you satisfied with the faculty as it is?

Branam: Well, I think the faculty at Washington and Lee, in nearly every respect, have lived up to my expectation. If I look at the faculty as made up of a group of individuals, in and of themselves, and here I'm trying to distinguish between my ideal faculty and what we have, the faculty that we have here, they're fantastic. Do they meet the expectations or the needs of minority students? Yes, because the needs of minority students at Washington and Lee are the same as those for they white students--they should be--and those are academic.

I guess to the degree that they take into account problems that may arise as a result of a minority student being a minority student on this campus, I don't think they really take those situations into account, but I don't want minority students to make excuses for the problems that they may have at Washington and Lee, just like you wouldn't expect a female student or a male student to make excuses based on their particular religion or sex or whatever.

Although one of the peculiar situations that has happened many times at W&L is that when an issue, either a current issue or something that's being talked about based on a reading, when that issue presents something that is particular to

the black American experience, it's funny but you oftentimes see the professor or the students sort of turn your way as if you're supposed to give the response from the black perspective. The O.J. Simpson trial, for instance. I mean, that's a ridiculous example, but--

Warren: No, it's not.

Branam: Well, I only said that because I think the whole trial is ridiculous. But the O.J. trial, or if you're talking about racism in society, you're reading [W.E.B.] DuBois or you're reading whatever, it seems like professors and students expect that you're going to give the black perspective. That, I think, is one of the most frustrating things about the academic experience of black students, because there are so many misunderstandings in that presumption. There's the misunderstanding that all blacks think alike, that you know how blacks think, that you think the same way that other blacks think, whether you even care, you know? And that's happened a dozen times at W&L. I'm sure it happens everywhere. I don't think it's particular to us, but I've said on a number of occasions, you know, prefaced my response by sort of illuminating the problems in that presumption and then going on to say, "Here's how I feel. If you want to take it for the black perspective, take it. If you want to take it for my perspective, take it."

Now, my ideal faculty, of course, would be more, I don't know, more integrated, more imaginative, creative, still committed to teaching undergrads, but it seems like when I think about my favorite professors on this campus, my favorite professors that I've had, a number of them are gone because the institution wasn't committed to the way they taught or the way they looked at the world. All of them were proven academics, and so that's a real source of frustration, women and minorities, and white men, too. It's not just black men. Obviously Washington and Lee needs to do a better job of hiring black professors, qualified black professors, qualified white professors, white women. We have plenty of white men. I think

there's a problem there. Amazingly enough, the students at Washington and Lee, while in public, they talk about their frustrations with the political scene and affirmative action and social programs that disproportionately help blacks and the poor. Deep down, though, I think there is a real sense of yearning to understand and to learn, and I think that can be found in the fact that when "black courses" are offered, there's a waiting list fifteen, twenty people long nearly every time.

Warren: Who takes those classes?

Branam: Whites, blacks, everybody, women, men. They're the most integrated courses at Washington and Lee.

Warren: And yet did you say they're not offered very often?

Branam: Yes. I'll give you some specifics. Professor Simpson's African-American art course is offered, I think, every other year or every third year, maybe. That had twenty-three students. All these courses tend to attract what I would consider the most dynamic professors, those professors are not necessarily interested in standing up and lecturing. They usually want to conduct it in a type of seminar, which you usually can't have more than fifteen students. But these courses have fifteen people on the waiting list, and because the professors want Washington and Lee students to have the experience, the classes end up ballooning to maybe twenty-three or twenty-four. So, you know, that's happened.

There's an African-American lit course that's taught in the English Department. Professor Peck, who was the professor of that, of course, was let go by Washington and Lee, not rehired. Professor Hall over in the Politics Department chose to leave for personal reasons but also because of some of the realities on campus, but he taught three black courses within politics.

Warren: What do you mean because of the realities on campus?

Branam: I shouldn't speak for him, but he and I were very close. I don't think he'd mind to a certain degree. His wife is a dean of the North Carolina school system, so

he would commute every week. He did that for six years. So those were the personal reasons, you know, being away from the family and his young daughter, but the fact that there are no other, except for Professor Hobbs in the law school, there were no other consistent black professors with whom he could bounce ideas off of, and that's, I imagine, frustrating for an academic. So even though he was committed to Washington and Lee, and they offered him tenure, they were going to give him raises, whatever he wanted, he could have asked for anything and he would have gotten it, but it just goes to show there's a lot more to be said than money.

And so, anyways, I'd like to see a more diversified group of professors, and I think that the Washington and Lee students are proving over and over again, whether subconscious or not, that they, too, are interested in a different perspective. If their response is, "I hated that professor because he or she thought in such a way and I totally disagreed with it," well, that's learning. To learn what one dislikes--I mean, very few people can actually articulate what it is about something that they dislike. So that's an important part of learning. But if you have a group of professors who think just like the students who came from the same background as the students, well, you're not going to have a very interesting dialogue.

Warren: Well said. How about alumni? And I feel very odd, because I agree with what you said a few minutes ago about how obnoxious it must be for you to be asked to represent the minority point of view. I'm doing it myself. But you're doing it, and you agreed to come and do it, so let me continue on with these obnoxious questions. How important is black alumni? Do they come back? Do they reach out? What role have they played for you?

Branam: Virtually no role at all. I have met two black alumnus who were not here during any part of my four years. There are some, obviously, alumni now that I

know because they were here during my four years here. So I won't count them. But the other two were just casual, one-time--

Warren: You're in Kathekon, right?

Branam: No.

Warren: I thought you were. Okay.

Branam: I do phone calls for them, but I don't [unclear]. You know, I think that's really unfortunate. Well, I mean, it is unfortunate. I can understand. I imagine that their experience at W&L was tenfold more difficult than mine or present students, although to a certain degree, they were here in larger numbers in the past, they have been, than we are now, but the expectations were very difficult, and they were trail blazers, and so we're riding their wave. But I guess students now have some different problems than they did. But irregardless of how they feel about Washington and Lee as an institution and their experience, I would be appalled to find any of them who would not be concerned about the experience of present-day MSA black students on campus. I can't imagine any of them not being concerned or empathizing with our experience here, our frustrations. So to that extent, I think it's unfortunate that they don't call or come back or provide insight, provide job opportunities or links, and I say that having had white alumni who have been some of the kindest people I've met, who've opened doors or may yet open doors for me and who are genuinely interested in my being successful because it promotes the good of the institution. So if the reason that black alumni don't come back and offer their assistance, if their reasons are personal, I think that that's unfortunate, but I guess I'll be in their shoes next year. So we'll see. Maybe I'll be hypocritical. I don't know. I doubt it. I doubt it.

Warren: Do you plan to come back?

Branam: Oh, yeah. Definitely.

Warren: What would bring you back? What do you think? Sitting here today, what do you think will bring you back as an alumnus?

Branam: Well, it won't be the parties. It won't be the students. When I was applying for the job that I now have, there is a professor in the Politics Department, Professor Connelly, and he and I disagree on a lot of things. I think I'm probably considered a flaming socialist at this school, and he's fairly conservative, but when I was applying for this job, he said, "Well, can I call and encourage the Higher Achievement Program to hire you?"

And I said, "Well, of course." And I said, "Well, just out of curiosity, what are you going to tell them?"

And he said, "Well, I'm going to tell them that you're an enduring optimist." And I think that that is what will bring me back to Washington and Lee, in addition to my love for the institution itself, but I want to come back because I think Washington and Lee can improve on its already great foundation and great traditions. I wouldn't come back if I thought it was hopeless.

I think Washington and Lee can be all that it is and more and better than the fourteen or fifteen institutions that are ranked above us. Numbers aren't important, but we have almost everything we need, all the capability, but we just need people to sort of push us in the right direction. So if they'll let me, you know, I'll do it. I'd love to.

Warren: Two last items, I think, to talk about. You're a politics major. What has Mock Convention been for you?

Branam: Mock Convention is good. It was a very good experience. I mean, it was fantastic. I was State Chair for Oregon. Had it been a Democratic Convention, I'm sure I would have run for one of the higher positions, but I knew that I would have some real frustrations with the Republican convention, but I think as a tool to learn about the political process, I think that it's unparalleled. I did it in high school as

well. And so I think it's growing. I mean, it's already one of great traditions of Washington and Lee, but this year, having broken records and been on national television live, which was unprecedented, I think it clearly benefits the institution in terms of its ability to recruit successful high school students.

When Duke won the national championship, and this is shown over and over--I'm sure you're familiar with this, but when Division One schools win national titles, as Duke did back in '92, '91, Duke could have filled its entire freshman class with 4.0s because of having one the national championship, so they found out. Of course, they didn't, but the point is, when you have that national exposure, you can draw great students. So because we're not the Division One powerhouses, we have Mock Convention.

Warren: Did you know about Mock Convention before you came here?

Branam: Yeah.

Warren: Was it a draw?

Branam: Yes, definitely.

Warren: And were you involved through all four years? You're an interesting person in that you came just after a Mock Convention and you're terminating with a Mock Convention.

Branam: Yeah. My position in terms of when I graduate, you know, from high school and college and the national conventions, my being a senior in both cases is great because I've been able to hold leadership positions both in my high school convention and this convention, which is mostly reserved for seniors. Yeah, it was definitely a draw. When I was a prospective, they had a list of people who had come and spoke, [Bill] Clinton, [Michael] Dukakis, you know, and that was a big draw. Not many schools of this size can do that. So it showed me that Washington and Lee was doing something special in political.

Warren: I'm very intrigued. As I sat there in the Mock Convention, and I'm of your persuasion, and watching these kids and how totally gung-ho they were, and it was obvious that part of their thrill was that this was a Republican convention, and I'm this great observer at this point, and this was my first year here, and I thought to myself, "My God, this must have been acting job for the last three or four conventions."

Branam: Apparently so.

Warren: And so I'm interested. Did that come out? Were people really talking about that as it was coming up, how thrilled they were that it was Republican?

Branam: Oh, yeah. In fact, I'm not sure if you caught the comment at the alumni reception that we met at when Dean Howison, when asked about Mock Convention, I think, made the comment that finally Washington and Lee students didn't have to act, and that certainly created another level of excitement that was there. I sort of sat back and laughed a lot of it off. Politics, for me, it's a love, it is a joy, but it's also pretty serious. So I do become very frustrated. In fact, I left the convention during Newt's [Gingrich] speech and wrote a critique of Bill Bennett's, which everyone thought was a great speech, but it was logically flawed.

But, I mean, boy, it was amazing to think that Washington and Lee, the size of the institution and the fact that we're great students, but you know, we're students, and we don't have the resources that the national campaigns had, but when the race was very much in doubt, we came incredibly close to an accurate prediction, as we later found out. So from a state chairman's point of view, having conducted most of the research myself for Oregon, I was thrilled that--if we would have gotten a grade, it would have been an A-plus, you know.

Warren: Tell me about that. Tell me about doing the research.

Branam: Well, doing the research, the State Chair had persons on his committee that could help. It was up to the state chairman to decide to what degree his or her

involvement would be in doing the research, planning the floats. Oregon was--we pumped out our teeshirts before any other state for the convention. We were proud of that. In fact, we sold them to a lot of other delegations. Students really liked them.

The research was really detailed. We were required to go back to the states, not physically, but talk to all of the persons in the controlling committee of the Republican party in the state, all of the county heads of the party, members of the media, academics at the universities, to get as many different perspectives, because, of course, when you are talking to a chairman of a county, for instance, in Oregon, depending on the region, that person may be more conservative or less conservative than the constituents which they represent. That's very important to know, because then if you call them up and say, "How are the people feeling?" if you don't know their persuasion, then you may get a totally inaccurate portrayal. In fact, Oregon comes out to look very conservative when, in fact, we're not, based upon population distribution and the fact that most of the chairmen and chairwomen are more conservative than their constituents, things like that. So you really have to know the game to predict, and every state chairman or chairwoman was required to know the rules of voting and things like that. And then, when you, of course, put them all together you get the whole. It was pretty complex, I think.

Warren: And how do you think you'll take this experience of Mock Convention and use it in your political life?

Branam: That's interesting. Well, for one, it looks good on the résumé, and especially for me, you know, as a politics major and going into politics. I'd done it in high school, but this was, of course, in a lot more detail. I think it improved my research skills and it taught me a lot about how politics on the state level work. I'm much more familiar with how the federal level, although I've worked on a number of campaigns, so I've had that experience now, and then I've also sort of from the

political analyst perspective. So it's just really building skills that are necessary for running campaigns, you know, which is what I want to do, and being able to put everything together and make sense out of what oftentimes appears to be fickle or uninformed voting behavior, which it's really not. There really are concrete reasons. A person's ability to figure that out is the strength of their understanding of the political process.

Warren: We're almost done with the tape. I would like to come full circle and get back on that first-class flight coming into Washington and Lee the first time. Was that normal, to fly somebody in first class?

Branam: No. No. You know, I would love to think that they did it to impress me. The reality is that probably every other seat was sold out. I don't remember at the time. I don't remember. I don't know why. I don't I don't remember how many black students came in with my class. It was pretty low. We're only graduating five, I think, six maybe. I've forgotten. So they could have been desperate. You know, maybe my scores were attractive to them. Certainly the fact that I was black and from the Northwest.

Warren: How did they know you were black?

Branam: I'm sure I put it on the form. Also, as I said, Andy was a good friend of mine. He was an honors scholar here, and he worked, I think, with the admission-- I mean, I know he went over there and said, "You've got to get this guy. He's a friend of mine." I'm sure he told them a little bit about me. I think they were pretty conscious of--I mean, if I were white, I don't think they would have been as proactive as they were, especially because I did apply late, as I said. I think the deadline was January fifteenth. I didn't send it in until--in fact, I think I faxed it something like on the twentieth or something like that. I probably didn't do the best job on my application because I didn't really care. I mean, I didn't really care about Washington and Lee. I was set to go to U of O, and they were going to give me

\$2,000 in cash every year to go to U of O. I would have been loving life instead of paying for it here, but I think I made the right decision. I hope so.

Warren: So when you arrived as a freshman, tell me about that.

Branam: Well, my weekend--I never really did figure this out. When I came as a prospective, I came on a weekend where there were a number of other minority students here, but it wasn't Minority Student Weekend, I don't think, because there were a number of white students here as well. I think it was probably a coincidence, although they do tend to keep the weekends separate. I think that does a disservice to the prospectives, because on the weekend you don't really get the feel for Washington and Lee on the hill that you do during the week, obviously, and they always put the black students with another black student as a host. So when you come here and you come in with all these other black prospectives, you really get a different feel for Washington and Lee than the real experience.

So when I came as a prospective, as I look back, I was pretty uninformed. Fortunately, it ended up working out. But I remember the first day walking on the hill, on the Colonnade, I thought, "You know, I thought there were a lot more black students on this campus when I came here," and I was pretty surprised and uncomfortable, and I wouldn't say I felt betrayed, but I do remember feelings like, "This wasn't the impression that they wanted to give me when I came." But who's to blame them? If they gave every black student the real deal, Washington and Lee as it is would be a pretty hard sell, you know? They've got to break the cycle somehow. Lying, though, is not--I wouldn't say they lied, but they didn't tell the whole truth.

Warren: And the Honor Code a little bit?

Branam: Something like that. Something like that.

Warren: I think it's an interesting pattern, and I'm not sure how it's going to be changed. We're just about at the end of the tape. Would you like to summarize in any particular way?

Branam: I think I mentioned before that most of the time I talk about, and black students tend to talk about, the negatives of W&L, but although I have a deep commitment to W&L, I still am very much self-promoting, and I wouldn't have stayed here if I didn't think it would help me, inasmuch as I do enjoy helping other people in the school, but Washington and Lee is a great school, and it has done a number of things for me that have helped me.

When I came here, or in high school, I had 2.0s, 1.5s, been in jail, taken in custody, nearly in a farm home. I mean, Washington and Lee has transformed me, I think, in many respects for the good, and so I guess the point is that for all its bad things, Washington and Lee has what *U.S. News and World Report* says, the best buy four years running, five years running, something like that.

Warren: Well, I'm glad you think so, since you've made such a huge investment in it.

Branam: Amen to that.

Warren: Thank you, John.

Branam: Thank you.

[End of interview]