

Don Mills Interview Transcription

April 4th, 2021

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

This is Sylviane Greensword. I'm here interviewing Dr. Don Mills. Today is April the 23rd. The year is 2021 and we are in Rees Jones Hall, room 113. Dr. Mills, thank you for joining us and thank you for participating in the Oral History Project with the Race & Reconciliation Initiative. So, let's start with some background questions. Can you tell us a little bit about your upbringing, where you're from and how you grew up?

DR. DON MILLS:

Sure. I did most of my growing up in West Virginia. We lived in 3 miles from the nearest town, and that was a town of 900 people, so it was pretty rural. My dad was a metallurgical engineer and worked in a metal alloys plant. He was a second generation, first generation American, his father was an immigrant from Scotland. My mother was an immigrant from Norway, and she came to the United States when she was 17 because her father sent her from Norway so she would not be there when the Germans attacked Norway, prior to World War II. So, she came by herself to the US and I made it clear to us when we were growing up that our job was to be independent. And I sometimes resented that, but in the long run I think that's been a very helpful trait. But growing up in West Virginia, in rural West Virginia, it's a beautiful place, but if you don't hunt and fish, there's not a lot to do. And hunting and fishing is not my forte, so I wanted to leave after high school. So, I went to College in Boston. And that was a great experience.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

May I ask what institution?

DR. DON MILLS:

Pardon me?

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

May I ask what university?

DR. DON MILLS:

Harvard, and it was a great experience. It was in the mid-1960s, which was a wonderful time to be in college. I'm probably glad it wasn't a college administrator then; it was a good time to be a student. And it was the first time that I was really exposed to any big ideas. Exposure to lots of different people. In West Virginia, I had a lot of friends, people from various socioeconomic, but basically everybody pretty much had the same experience, same life experience. When I got to Boston, I began to see things in a completely different way and understand things differently. Of course, the Civil Rights movement was in full force. Shortly after that, the anti-Vietnam War

movement came to the floor. And so, there was sort of a ferment, it was the foundation for almost everything else that happened. Very exciting, for a kid from West Virginia, it was a little bit like, "what?" But I think it was very helpful way to do college 'cause you're learning in the classroom but also what was going on around us. So, when I was a senior, I decided, okay, I have to do something with my life. And I've always been a person where faith was important. I decided I wanted to become a minister, and I had to figure out where to go. And I decided I had never been west of the Mississippi River, so I would only apply to seminaries that were west of the Mississippi River for adventure. And then I decided I would go to the school that I could afford. And so, that turned out to be Brite Divinity School, which is how I got to Fort Worth. After a year at Brite Divinity School, a dean brought me into his office and he asked me how my year was and I said, "you know, pretty good, it's fine." And he said, "well, there's a job at TCU in student affairs and I think you would be good at that job, and I'm going to recommend that you apply for that job." And I've told him, and I've told others, that was the Dean's way of saving both me and the church (laughs). So, I did finish at Brite, and I did become ordained, but I never had a church. I will say that my training at Brite, that has been very helpful and just sort of how I view the world, how I think about problems and challenges. So, I started working student affairs in 1969.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

Okay.

DR. DON MILLS:

I can tell you about what I've done over the years if you want.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

Well, I wanna go back in time first, so your father was clearly an educated man.

DR. DON MILLS:

Yes, he was a college graduate, he went to what is now Carnegie Mellon, at the time it was Carnegie Tech.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

And how was the importance of education in your upbringing?

DR. DON MILLS:

You know, that's interesting because we never talked about it, but we always knew we had to go to college.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

Okay, when you say we, how many siblings?

DR. DON MILLS:

I had two brothers. One older, one younger.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

Okay.

DR. DON MILLS:

My mother never went to college. And she talked often about how she was sorry that she had missed that opportunity. So, we just knew after we finished high school, we're going to college.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

And so, I know that you had interaction with people from other nationalities with your family's immigrant background. Did you have any interactions growing up with people of other ethnicities?

DR. DON MILLS:

Yeah, the high school where I went had a few African Americans.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

So, it was an integrated school?

DR. DON MILLS:

It was an integrated school. But it was not, well West Virginia doesn't have many African American people, didn't then, doesn't now. So, I'm guessing that probably about 10% of the high school was People of Color. And so, most of our classes were mostly white kids, but, you know, played sports with some African Americans and was good friends with several. But it wasn't the kind of interaction that one would hope for now, right? We, you know, everybody went to the same dance, little town, I mean, you know. Everybody went to the same dances. Everybody hung out in the same drug stores in those days. But there was no interracial dating. And our communities were pretty segregated.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

And what about going to Boston? Was there any difference?

DR. DON MILLS:

Yeah (laughs). But you know, the thing about never having really been in a big city, I was excited, I was anxious, and I was scared.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

Everything was new.

DR. DON MILLS:

Yeah, and my roommate, my first roommate, was African American, from New Orleans, by the way. And he was a, you know, wonderful guy. What was hard for me, with just learning simple things like how do you go from Cambridge to Boston, which was what 3 miles maybe, and learning how to ride the subway? How do you do public transportation? And I felt like everybody else knew how to do it, but I did not. And it was also interesting to me to watch how the people on the subway changed from college time people to more working people, more People of Color. And then as we got into downtown Boston, more business type people. So, that the subway became almost a sociological study of who all these people are. And so, once I figured out how to get places and how to change trains, and how to grow up different levels. It was and it became easy. Then you could say, who are all these other people and what are they doing? And I've enjoyed always watching people, and sort of saying, "I wonder what they're doing or what their life is like?" But it sounds strange even to me now to think back how naive I was about simple things, like public transportation.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

Right. And your desire to become a minister? I suppose it did not come overnight. Can you tell us about your religious upbringing?

DR. DON MILLS:

Sure. My mother was Lutheran, of course from Norway, everybody's Lutheran. And my dad grew up congregationalist. And we attended Presbyterian churches, Methodist churches, depending on what was available. And I was, I would not say that we were as a family overly religious, but we were a family who took our responsibilities as humans seriously, and that we were not put here to have fun and to just enrich ourselves, but we were put here to do something. It was not particularly put it in religious faith terms. When I was in college and so many things were happening and there were so many, what appear to be breakdowns in society. I began to get more interested in how does my faith respond to this? And I felt like if we were going to be a country at war, we needed to come to grips with what the Bible said about war. And if we were going to be a country where the least among these were treated poorly, we had to come to grips with what our faith said about that, and part of that was West Virginia too because the depth of poverty, even when I was there and it's much worse now, but the depth of poverty back in some of the mountains was incredible. There were people who I went to school with who did not have indoor plumbing. You know, that was kind of amazing, and of course when I told people that we didn't have dial telephones. That's pretty amazing (laughs). So, I think my faith grew, maybe not from the inside as much as from observation and thinking. There has to be a way to look at these issues that I can get my hands around and can do something with. So, I felt called strongly to do something.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

Right. And so, what kind of concrete accomplishments do you think you could have done with all the responsibilities of a minister?

DR. DON MILLS:

Yes, my children will tell you that I like to preach (laughs).

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

That's one thing, yeah.

DR. DON MILLS:

I do like to preach. I think I have more influence when I can be one on one with people or in small groups, than in large settings. My first job in Texas was youth minister at First, Methodist Church of Mineral Wells, TX. And the primary industry of Mineral Wells, TX at that time was Fort Walters, which was the primary helicopter training base for helicopter pilots who were gonna go off to Vietnam. So, maybe not wisely, but I decided that one of the things that you should talk about was what does it mean when our families are at war, and what does our faith say about it and what's does the Bible say about. That didn't go over particularly well with some of the parents who were in the military. And I think I would have handled it much differently if I've been more experienced. But we did have some pretty interesting conversations with those young men and women about how do we balance what's happening in the world, with what we read, and what we know, and all we pray about, and balancing that. So, in many ways, I see these guys who have big churches and they write a sermon every Sunday and, my wife and I during the pandemic, we watched three services every Sunday. Because I like to watch extra preachers and I like to watch the different styles, but I don't know that that really would have been satisfying for me. I much preferred, how can we talk about what we can go and do? And how we can grow and that's why working in higher education, it's been so fulfilling for me because you can help in a more intimate way if that makes sense.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

Very good. So, you started Harvard in '64?

DR. DON MILLS:

Yeah.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

So yeah, like you said, it was right in the midst of the Civil Rights movement. How did you experience that in terms of like race relations, how did you experience it personally, but also how do you think as a minister you could have played a part?

DR. DON MILLS:

Yeah. That's an interesting question. I think I experienced, early in my career at Harvard I experienced the Civil Rights movement as what's going on? I really didn't understand it. I didn't have a sense of what it meant to be a Person of Color. I didn't have a sense of oppression and I didn't understand why people were, why white people were so afraid of People of Color. As I experienced it more, and I was not a freedom rider, I didn't, you know, go down South to register voters. But as I got to know more people and experienced it more, I began to understand, at least intellectually, why people thought this was so important. And frankly, I thought Lyndon Johnson

was a great president when he got the Civil Rights Bill passed and again the Voting Rights. I didn't think he was so great later on when he expanded the war in Vietnam, but that's another story. So, my sense of race grew. I worked for a packaging company, so one of my jobs was to find places where people make boxes would go buy boxes.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

Sounds fascinating.

DR. DON MILLS:

So, I found a place and had to go pick 'em up. I didn't have a car, so I got on a bus and we went into Roxbury, which is an African American part of Boston. And it was the first time that I ever felt I'm the only person who looks like me. And I went into this box factory and everybody in there was African American. You know, everybody is very nice. I told them who I was and they said, "okay, here's your order." They said, "how you gonna get back?" And I said "I'm gonna ride the bus." They said, "well, we're gonna wrap it up a different way." I mean, it was just a very nice interaction. But that was the first time I thought what must it be like when you're the only person who's Black or Brown in a sea of white people. So, I thought that was a pretty helpful time. And I went back there many times to get boxes 'cause they were, as far as I could tell, I knew they were good boxes and they were also affordable, so we bought them.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

How would that compare to your experience at TCU?

DR. DON MILLS:

Well, at TCU, when I got here, TCU had been integrated for 30 years, I think. Well, I'm trying to remember when James Cash came.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

That was '66.

DR. DON MILLS:

'66, so that's the date everybody says although I know it was sooner. And there were very few people here. I did know most of the football players who left in 1970, and I still can't believe how talented they were and we let them go over some stupid thing. I don't know if you know that story about the beards?

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

I would like for you to elaborate on that actually.

DR. DON MILLS:

Well, I was not in the room, right? This is- we hired a coach who had been to Tulane, who came up, and you know, "we're gonna have some discipline on the team." And he said everybody is

going to be clean shaven. And the only people who were not clean shaven already were the African American kids. And they correctly voiced opposition that this was a race thing. And the chancellor at the time said, "no, he's treating everyone the same." And my boss was a woman named Elizabeth Proffer. And I know she went to bat for the student athletes, but nothing changed. And so, they walked. Two of the guys who walked ended up like professional football. I think two, it may have been three, but they all went elsewhere and did extremely well. And I don't know if you've interviewed any of them.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

Not yet.

DR. DON MILLS:

Ray Rhodes was, you know, he became an NFL head coach as well as a player. So, it was a while before TCU recovered from that. Not just losing good players, but also the word was at this was not a place to come. That and Ronnie Hurdle was my introduction to real racial discrimination. You know, Ronnie was treated so poorly. I saw him the other day, and I haven't seen him for a long time, but I've thought about him pretty frequently.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

What did you hear that happened to him, or did you personally interact with him?

DR. DON MILLS:

I interacted with him a little.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

Okay.

DR. DON MILLS:

Not much 'cause goodness knows what do I know about cheerleading? (Laughs). But you know he's elected cheerleader and some people objected to the fact that an African American man was touching a white girl. You know, you lift them up and put them on your shoulder. I mean, that's what your cheerleaders do.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

Right.

DR. DON MILLS:

And in those days, it wasn't as much tumbling and flipping as there is now. It was real leading cheers so on. And they wanted him gone, you know, and not be part of the cheerleading squad. So, again, people- she became the dean of students, but Elizabeth Proffer was really fighting for, you know, let's do the right thing. So, he was allowed to remain a cheerleader, but they made some rules on how he had to interact with the girls and it was just, you know, it just puts it right

out there with the challenges were that African Americans students faced. And there weren't very many.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

So, you interacted with him like in your function as a TCU employee?

DR. DON MILLS:

Yeah, I was working student activities.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

Okay, I see.

DR. DON MILLS:

But as I say, it wasn't much. I had much more significant interaction like with the President of Student Body and some of those.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

So, one thing that puzzles me is, Dr. Hurdle, he was he was elected. So, that means that there is a majority of a certain population that wanted him on the squad, so who then would counter something that was, you know, democratically established? Who are they? 'Cause we always say they (laughs).

DR. DON MILLS:

It was not students, it was supporters. My guess is some parents, some donors. I think the student body, I would say in those days the student body was very traditional.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

Right.

DR. DON MILLS:

But it probably liked the society, the way it was, but it was not a particular- and there were some mean people, and I'm sure there were some mean incidents. But it wasn't one that was out to get people and Ronnie was very popular, Jennifer Giddings was very popular, just as people on campus and people vote for their friends. You know there is no platform to get cheerleader, you know. And so, Ronnie had a lot of friends and their friends had friends. The fraternities and sororities controlled a lot of the elections and they elected him. As same with Jennifer. So, I don't think there was overt racism among the students. The pressure was all coming from outside the student body.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

That's interesting.

DR. DON MILLS:

And outside the faculty. I had a faculty, guy named Harold Lunger. He taught Christian Altaics at Brite Divinity School. The visit of Martin Luther King to Fort Worth was originally, you know people hadn't invited him to speak to TCU, of course. Who knows, you know, the ground opened up, I guess. But Harold Lunger lived right next to campus, you know where Trinity Episcopal Church is?

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

Yes.

DR. DON MILLS:

He lived right next to Trinity Episcopal Church and get Martin Luther King Jr. in his home. And so, for me to be able to get to know Dr. Lunger, and have him as a teacher, that was a great experience. And I think he was representative of many, many, many faculty at TCU, that wanted the campus to be much more open.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

Yeah, I remember before the 1964, Proclamation of Integration, civil surveys, where were sent out and the students were for desegregation, the faculty, several of them were also in favor. But Chancellor Moudy did express concern about this, the physical proximity between males and females of different races and, you know, I remember reading that you know, don't worry about interracial marriages because we have raised our kids better, so they know better. That was basically the- I'm paraphrasing. So now having that incident with Ronnie Hurdle and being so close, physical proximity, to white female cheerleaders, that must have been such a shocking possibility.

DR. DON MILLS:

Yeah, and Dr. Moudy was still chancellor.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

And he had just reassured parents that such thing would never happen.

DR. DON MILLS:

Yeah, it was a, well it was a mind blown.

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