

Amber Benton Oral History

Recorded October 12, 2024, at Pacific University in Forest Grove, Oregon, during Homecoming / Reunion.

Interviewer: Jenny Johnson-Riley ("JJR"), Pacific University Class of 1998.

This transcription was made through AI with manual corrections, clarifications, and editing of some repetitions and filler words, Feb. 2025.

[JJR] 0:00

So this is Jenny Johnson-Riley. It is October 12, 2024, and I am sitting here with Amber Benton. Amber, can you tell me a little bit about what times you were here and what your field of study was?

[Benton] 0:14

I was here 2005. Yeah, freshman year was 2005 and I graduated in 2009. I started as a double major in Biology and Spanish, but I wanted to finish in four years. And so in order to do that, if I kept the Biology, I would have had to be here longer. So, dropped Biology my senior year. I just graduated with my Spanish major. I think it's officially Bachelor of Arts, like World Languages and Spanish now, because [that's] what they're calling it.

[JJR]

Where did you live?

[Benton]

I lived on campus all four years of my time here. Started out in Walter Hall, and then after that, I moved into Burlingham Hall, because I was an RA, and so I was in the first incoming group that got to stay in Burlingham Hall. And then I stayed in Burlingham after that with some roommates who I'm still close with today.

[JJR] 1:16

Were you involved in particular activities or organizations or sports?

[Benton] 1:24

I should say I did a stint in Vandervelden, the apartments, because that tied into your question. Now, I was a student ambassador at the time, and so we had ambassador training. We had got to stay in the upperclassmen apartments for the summer. But I did a couple of things, like first year, as I was out of state, being a first-gen college student, and one of just a handful of black students on campus, and I came from Las Vegas. And that year, I don't think there were any other freshmen, or at least I didn't meet any freshmen that were from Las Vegas until my sophomore year, there were some incoming students from Vegas.

[Benton]

After freshman year, I got more involved. But part of that was because I became friends with a lot of students from Hawaii. And Auntie Edna [advisor for the Hawaiian club / luau] was here at the time, and she was really supportive of me. Since there weren't any black students, or a Black Student Union or anything like that back then, I did a lot with NHOH [Nā Haumāna O Hawai'i, the Hawaiian student club], and so got linked into doing Lu'au, and I took the hula class. I don't know if they still have the hula class, do they? But they used to offer it as an elective, you can take the hula, and it was here. It wasn't the Stoller Center at that time, it was just the PAC [Pacific Athletics Center]. But we had a hula class, and I took it two years in a row, and part of that is you had to dance in luau. Because I had friends, I also did Tahitian dancing. The students ran that that group, and taught that dance. So I did a lot with the Hawaiian students.

[Benton]

And then, more formally, like I said, I started sophomore year as an ambassador, and Joel was leading that at the time, just to reconnect with him on LinkedIn. But that was fun. I think that helped with my confidence, helped with my public speaking, because I kind of felt like I blossomed as a student. I'd be happy to talk to freshmen and give tours and help with Welcome Week. So that was really fun.

[Benton]

Then the following year, I was an RA. So again, I was in Burlingham Hall. I did that for a year, and as part of RA training, I remember we went whitewater rafting. I could not swim. My mother was not so happy, because it was a requirement to go whitewater rafting. I also wore glasses at the time, and I could not see - you had to lock your glasses in a little box. That's a vivid memory. I'm happy I did it, in hindsight, like at the end of the trip. But going in, it is a little nervous. I did not enjoy the flip drill part of that, and so that that was fun, RA training.

[Benton]

So I would say those are the biggest things I did. Victor [Rodríguez] was my professor for Spanish, and he was my thesis advisor. I used to also go to Spanish club. Victor...

[JJR] 4:25

What's his last name? Victor ..

[Benton]

Rodriguez. Is he still here? Do you know?

[JJR]

I think I saw him yesterday.

[Benton] 4:30

Oh did you? He probably wouldn't even recognize me! But yeah -- He would host things. Him, and the other -- I forget her name, but she was another woman who taught Spanish, and they would invite us to their house. And I remember Victor gave me a book when I graduated, a Spanish book. And so, I tried to -- I did a mix of quite a few things, because we didn't have as much formal things as the students do have now. Like, the student orgs are way more expansive [now]. And so, yeah, I think those are least the bigger things that I remember.

[JJR] 5:09

What are some of the biggest changes you saw during your time at Pacific?

[Benton] 5:13

One is the Black Student Union, and that's part of why I wanted to be more engaged, because I got the postcard last year about the Soul Food Dinner. And then I was like, "I have to go see what this is." That was my first question! I was like, "Why is Pacific doing this Soul Food Dinner?" My class had a handful of black students, and half of those, I would say -- at one time, I knew all the people on the list, but half of those students were from Hawaii, so their connection was with NHOH [Nā Haumāna O Hawai'i]. So it was like, you know, they kind of had a thing.

[Benton]

But for students who were black and not from Hawaii, there wasn't really anything. So when I got the Soul Food [invitation] I was like, "What are they doing?" And then I looked it up. I was like, "Oh, they have a Black Student Union now!" And I saw the photo of the faculty, and so that is a very big change, the fact that we have a Black Alumni Chapter, that's big. And I did a tour today around campus just seeing the buildings. It's nice to see that they're still there; they seemed very well preserved. But there's a lot more dorms on campus, it seems like.

[Benton] 6:24

The dining hall [in Washburne Hall] is there still. But I was like, it's expanded, because now there's a coffee shop. It used to be the Bistro back then, where we would study. That was a place you could get late night food because, you know, this is pre-Uber, pre-Lyft. You're not going anywhere. And I didn't have a driver's license. I never drove and I never got one. So my whole four years I was here, I was like, on the bus and the Max. So if I wanted something, you know, the Bistro's where we all would hang out.

[Benton]

So I'm like: "Look, it's like, a little store [now, in Washburne Hall]. Now there's a [?] and then there's a [?]. I was like, it's two things. It's like, you know, we didn't have all of all of that. So that's nice. And also, now

there's a football team. Because there was not a football team when I was here. Soccer was, like, if you want to go to a sporting event, it was going to the soccer game. So I say that's from that standpoint.

[Benton]

Also, it's nice to hear that Pacific's more diverse now and that it's trying to get a HSI [Hispanic Serving Institution] status, you know, and be a double minority-serving institution [along with AANAPISI / Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions status]. I went to UNLV for my Master's, and UNLV is a double-minority serving institution. I was like, it'd be kind of nice to say, both my alma maters are double MSI. So there's that.

[Benton]

But I'd say that the essence of Pacific is still here. The classes -- they've maintained, even though, I know they said it's dipped a little. But I was like, it's still small. It's not like the population is double, which I think is, is good, you know, you get to know -- for better, for worse -- you get to know everybody and everything. Because if you stay all the way till graduation, it's like you do get to know everybody.

[Benton]

And our President [Phil Creighton], at the time, knew all. I told him all the time, like President Phil, Dr. Phil, he knew all of our names. He would sit in the UC and have lunch with us and talk to us, and he'd walk the campus. So that was nice, but it seems like that feeling of people caring is still here.

[Benton]

But I say the biggest change is with the Black students. I went to the Soul Food Dinner last night, co-hosted that, and I was like, wow. Like, there are black students to actually fill here, and there's alumni. I was like, when I was here, there was no Black Alumni connection. I didn't even know that there were Black alumni till I joined the Black Alumni Chapter [and learned] that at one time Pacific had, you know, over 100 black students here. It's like, nobody ever told me that history when I was on campus. So I think that's nice that now we're kind of merging generations, and so I hope this reiteration of the Black Student Union, that it can be sustained.

[JJR] 9:17

Were there any controversies, or big struggles on campus, things people were disagreeing about?

[Benton] 9:25

I don't know if there was a big... You know, now that I'm an adult, and [do] the work: I'm an Associate Dean for DEI. I've gone to grad school, and I study social issues. So I'm way more socially conscious than I was at Pacific. Now when I teach on, like, microaggressions, I'm like, "I didn't have that language back then." I think if I did, maybe I would have picked up on it.

[Benton]

I would say, as a student body, I felt like the biggest thing was about tuition, always. Like, you know, it's a private school. It's not the most expensive. I think at the time, Pacific was still considered an affordable private school. But, you know, many of us first-gen, it was -- I feel like that was like people always talked about, was affording Pacific. Pacific, I would say for me, though I did have some challenges as a student, it just felt like being here sometimes ... like Dr Phil was great, but I think the administration under him was not always the most supportive of me as a black student.

[Benton]

I work in higher ed now. It's very easy to say, "It's somebody else's job," you know. Like Auntie Edna, "it's her job" with the Hawaiian students here. But I'm like, you know, Student Life: your responsibility is all the students. When I was here at Pacific, it was just like, little rumblings of things that ... and I don't blame my classmates, but like, how do we foster people having a multicultural experience?

[Benton]

I'm coming from Vegas. White students would say things to me sometimes just because their experience is from Oregon. Like I'd get shamed -- I didn't know what composting was till I got to Pacific. I'm like, we aren't composting in Vegas, you know? So it's little things like that. I remember this student my freshman

year told me "I know more about black history than you do." Because he lived -- he grew up around -- why is the city slipping me?

[Benton] 11:22

Like, Black Wall Street [Tulsa, OK]. He's like, "I know all about this." Students would just say some of these things in passing. But one of the biggest things I remember is when I was an RA, I think we were still in RA training. I think we came back from the whitewater rafting. Or maybe, like, the first few weeks of semester. But I was in Burlingham, and my room that I had in Burlingham had two roommates, but I had a private entrance to my bedroom. And all the RAs [rooms] had white boards next to it. We came back, me and two other RAs, and somebody wrote the N word across my marker board.

[Benton]

I don't know if we had -- I don't think we had cameras in the dorms, or at least they told us they weren't real cameras. They could not find out [who did it]. We have more knowledge now. But I feel like back then, nobody really did. My two RA friends, they were the ones who told people. And they were like, "You don't need to wipe that off your board. We're gonna have somebody -- Somebody from the school needs to come and clean it up." So they made sure it got cleaned up. But I don't remember my hall director ever really talking [about it]. It was just kind of like, you know, "Do your duty rounds." It's just kind of like, "We'll get it cleaned up, business as usual."

[Benton]

And I'm like... [there was] nobody to really talk about that experience with, because when I'm only [one of] a handful of black students. I was never told a process. I was never told... I get it's hard to find out who did it. There's no cameras, but clearly somebody did it in the night. Because I remember they wrote across my marker, and like the marker even went onto the wall. So it seemed like they wrote in a rush, but definitely big. It was big. It was big enough to know, I mean, it was clear what they called me. And yeah, there was no process. Nobody ever asked about that.

[Benton]

And so there were things like that that would happen on campus. And like, there were certain faculty I remember who were very [blind?]. Like they did not think I had a chance at going to grad school, not at being successful. I was kind of like, "I don't know where you would get that from outside of your own biases." So I felt like that type of stuff was a part of my experience.

[Benton]

But again, it wasn't like a controversy, because there wasn't enough of us -- I didn't know if other Black students were experiencing this. We didn't talk about it, and I felt like sometimes the Hawaiian students' issues overshadowed any other student. Not saying their experiences weren't valid. But it was like, the Hawaiian students got to have two Hawaiian meals a week in the UC [dining in Washburne Hall]. So they got to have their food. But it's also like, "Who else's culture?" We also had international students, exchange students here, and it's like, "Well, we could just kind of, like, try to divvy this up." But again, it was because there was a lot of Hawaiians and they could demand those things.

[Benton]

I don't ever remember there really being a big deal about any Black History Month, anything like that. So, you know, it was an interesting time. Oh, that's something: I don't remember there being any Black faculty when I was here. And now, there's Black faculty. And, you know, I saw Dr. [Jay Cee] Whitehead here. She was very impactful in my learning, because I do DEI work now. I took her class, her feminism class; it meant so much to me. I was like, just like all these things we get to talk about. I took it so I feel like senior year.

[Benton]

If I would have took it earlier, I probably would have added on Sociology and tried to do that instead of the Biology. But yeah, in the Biology and the Chemistry department there was a lot of white men teaching those classes. I kept their recommendation letters that they tried to write for me. They were, I look back [at] that - They are some of the most horrible letters. Like I don't ... They would have been better just declining writing me a letter than actually writing it. It said nothing about me academically. But yeah, but it was really like the science faculty who did not have any faith in me as a student.

[Benton] 15:40

I would say that's the biggest thing. Outside of that, I wasn't on campus, but I went and studied abroad in Spain. That was a part of what we were required to do. So I went to Sevilla, and that was a really nice experience. The big thing at that time was President Obama got elected. I tried to participate in voting overseas, and my ballot came back to me a month later, saying [it wasn't counted], but he got elected anyway. I wasn't on campus, but that was a big thing for us in Spain. We're like, "Oh, we get to be a part of electing the first black president!" So it would have been nice to see what the reaction was on campus, but... So I would say that's like the biggest historical moment I remember as a student.

[JJR] 16:31

I'm sorry to hear about all that stuff that happened on campus to you. I appreciate you telling me. Is there anything else you want to share about your time at Pacific?

[Benton] 16:43

I will just say despite it all, I think I got a really good education at Pacific. I was telling Pierre [Morton], the Chief Diversity [officer]: I was like, I don't know, professors still do this... But when we were at Pacific, I don't know if it was a policy or just the ethos of the place, but they did not allow us to do Scantrons or multiple choice exams. Because they were [during the event where this was recorded] talking about students and midterms: You had to *know.* And that's also where some of my challenge was. I did have to repeat a class. It's like, you just have to know the material to study. But I'm going through that. I do all the things that universities [say] -- like "We empower critical thinking." And I really do believe it. I really do think that where they [lacked in?] biases and inclusive thinking, I think it did help with the critical thinking part. So I really appreciate that.

[Benton]

I will say honestly, Pacific: I didn't really feel smart until I left and I went to grad school, and I was like, "Oh." It was like, nothing against my peers at other places, but I got the masters and a PhD, and being at Pacific really did [something]. My professors in grad school told me, "Oh, going wherever you went, it was really good at developing your writing skills." They're like, "You have really strong writing skills!" And I attribute that to the test-taking methods we had at the Pacific and the critical thinking.

[Benton]

I think you get to do that in a small class. Versus, now, I work at a big school. So I do think that there were challenges, but I do appreciate the education I received while I was here, even in Biology, though I didn't finish in Biology. But then, also my language skills with Victor. I'm rusty now. [Laughs.] I would be embarrassed to try to write an academic paper in Spanish now, but still, like all my Spanish and grammar skills, even just critically thinking and trying to write things in another language, I appreciate Pacific for.

[JJR] 18:57

Thanks so much!