

Gloria Green Hooks¹

Family and Early Education

GGH: Let's see if I can remember that far back. I grew up in Washington. I was born in Washington. We lived in southeast Washington. We lived here. That's my father back there. We came here when I was ten. I went to Dunbar High School and graduated in 1949. I just had an average life.

CGW: Could you talk a little, for example, about some of the highlights in your high school? Were there any things that you enjoyed doing there? Is there anything that stands out very strongly in your mind about your high-school days?

GGH: I didn't belong to a whole lot of clubs or anything. I had three good friends. We were just good friends. We were just teenagers and had a lot of fun.

CGW: Were there any teachers who stand out in your mind, who you felt were very influential in your education while you were in high school?

GGH: Latin was always my favorite subject in high school. I remember the teacher. The main thing I remember about him is that he had a coaching class for us to take the SAT in Latin. I think that when I got to the SAT's and saw the test, I didn't take it. I picked something else. I remember he was very disappointed about that. But the Latin test looked too difficult to me, as I remember. I believe I took something else.

I guess math and Latin were my favorite subjects, so I think I remember those teachers more than any others. The one I remember who coached us was my Latin teacher in twelfth grade, I think, and before that I remember another Latin teacher. You're talking about people influencing me. I don't really remember anybody influencing me that much. You mean like inspiring me?

CGW: Exactly.

GGH: No, I don't remember that.

CGW: If you had to say who some of your heroes were during those early days, were there any people in your family whom you thought were very influential in your life, so to speak, at that point?

¹Edited and excerpted from an oral history interview conducted by Clarence G. Williams with Gloria Green Hooks, 2 Oct. 1997 [with additional comments by Mrs. Hooks's father, Mr. Green].

GGH: I can't really think of anybody. My friends and I just liked to have fun, you know. We were very silly. I don't remember anybody being a great influence. When I looked over your questionnaire, I was trying to remember how I had the idea of applying to MIT. I think that was the only school that I applied to too, but I don't remember why. I don't remember where I heard of it or anything.

CGW: Would you consider yourself in high school a shy person, or were you a very outgoing person?

GGH: I was more shy than outgoing. I had my little group of friends. I was friends with other people too. But no, I wasn't an outgoing person.

CGW: How would you say you did academically in high school?

GGH: I always did very well all through school. I never really had to study that much. I think that was the problem when I got to MIT.

CGW: In high school you didn't have to study, but it came easy to you.

GGH: Yes, it did. It came very easy.

CGW: Math was one of your favorite subjects, so I assume that you were taking some of the top math courses that they had to offer at Dunbar at that time, is that right?

GGH: Yes, I took all that they offered. The highest one they offered was trigonometry. They didn't offer calculus. I think I took all of the math classes. I think the top ones were trigonometry and solid geometry.

CGW: I'm sure you just knocked them out.

GGH: I did.

CGW: Do you recall how many people approximately were in your high school class, your graduating class?

GGH: My yearbook is around here somewhere. It was the largest class that had ever graduated in DC, something like that.

CGW: One of the things that is very clear, though, from what I've been able to gather, is that there were a lot of you during that period coming out of Dunbar who were very outstanding students and who went to various schools. Is that not right?

GGH: Yes, that was sort of everybody's ambition—to go to a nice school. I don't know where we got that from. I guess maybe the teachers, I don't remember, but that was everybody's aim. Everybody wanted to get into the best.

Arrival at MIT, September 1949: A Pioneering Black Woman Student

CGW: Although you don't quite remember how you decided to come to MIT, do you recall how you came up there?

GGH: My father and mother drove me.

CGW: Could you talk a little about what you can recall about that first impression? Or did you come before you actually were admitted?

GGH: No, I came after I was admitted. Dad, this is Dr. Williams from MIT, studying black students from MIT.

CGW: How are you doing, sir?

Mr. G: Okay.

CGW: I'm pleased to meet you.

Mr. G: Pleased to meet you.

CGW: I'm very pleased to have a chance to meet your very outstanding daughter. She is very important in terms of our presence at that school. I can't tell you how much she is a part of the history of that place. From the research I've done so far, it appears that Gloria is actually the second black woman to ever come to MIT. To have come there in the class of 1954 is a major, major achievement. When I tell the young ladies who are coming there now, they can't believe it. They can't believe that there was someone like them who had been there at that time. So she's a very important part of this history that I'm trying to put together. If I understand, you actually drove her up to Massachusetts.

Mr. G: Yes.

CGW: You remember that?

Mr. G: Oh yes.

CGW: That had to be quite an experience.

Mr. G: I had been in that area before, in Worcester.

GGH: We had cousins there, so we used to go up every summer.

CGW: Oh, okay. That city has grown tremendously.

GGH: Yes, it really has – a completely different thing now.

First Impressions: Facilities for Women at MIT

CGW: Yes. Is there anything you remember about your first year there?

GGH: Do they still have freshman weekend?

CGW: Yes, they still do.

GGH: That was a lot of fun. That's a good way to introduce freshmen to the school. When I first went to MIT, I didn't have a room in the dormitory. I lived with my cousins in Worcester, so I could commute on the train. I don't remember how long I did that, a month or two. Then a vacancy came up. I wasn't next on the list, but all the girls let me move in. They let me move up on the list because they knew I was commuting.

CGW: What house was that, do you remember?

GGH: 120 Bay State Road, the women's dormitory.

CGW: It was off campus really, right?

GGH: Yes, across the river – right across the bridge. There's no Bay State Road any more, is there?

CGW: Well, I think there is a Bay State Road there. It's near Boston University, I think.

GGH: Right opposite the Esplanade. I don't think it's there any more. I was up there a couple of years ago.

CGW: I think you're right, yes.

GGH: I think it held seventeen people. We had a house mother, Mrs. Alvord. I remember her. I think we had somebody else who cooked. I don't really remember who that was. There weren't many women at MIT.

CGW: No, there couldn't have been.

GGH: We were all pretty friendly. I remember there was one room in the building on Mass. Avenue, a set of rooms. I remember there was one big room and then there was a kitchen and maybe another room that was for the women students. Do they still have that?

CGW: Was it on the second floor?

GGH: I don't remember. It was up.

CGW: There is a room there that's for women, and still is. It says "Only women." It has a little study area in there. When they have the door open I can see in there, but I've never been in there. But there is still, yes, a room.

GGH: I remember MIT had gotten some of the architectural students to decorate it. They had all this modern furniture in there. Then some woman who had been a student there donated a couple of great big old couches – you know, those big old-fashioned couches. I remember they were tan. People used to fight for them. They were so much more comfortable, you know, than all the modern furniture.

Academic Struggles

The main thing I remember, though, about this first year was calculus. This was really a shock. Then I had a hard time with chemistry too for some reason, I don't know why. I finally realized that it's nothing but memorizing, but I had a hard time with it. I never took chemistry in high school. I took biology and physics in high school.

CGW: What would you say about that first year? Obviously you did not see any other black women there at the time, did you?

GGH: No, there were no others.

CGW: Did that pose any issues with you, any dilemmas being there? Even within just the last seven or eight years, simple things like there being more men's bathrooms than women's bathrooms, we had to do something about that because you had to go all out of your way – still to a certain extent today – to find a women's rest room. When did you enter?

GGH: 1949.

Community Issues

CGW: In 1949 and 1950, were there any things that you thought were dilemmas when you look back?

GGH: I remember I didn't know where to get my hair fixed. I think I started wearing just a corn row, you know, wash it and have a corn row. I didn't know anything about the black section of town. I think one time the house mother, Mrs. Alvord, took me to the black section to introduce me to some people. There was some place like a Y, I don't really remember. She was just trying to be helpful. I remember where she took me was all sort of like the ghetto, what you'd think of as the ghetto. I don't think anything ever came of it. I didn't really connect with the people there, probably because of my age.

Since I've been thinking about your questionnaire, I was thinking about my daughter. If she had been in that position, she wouldn't have had the same reaction. She would have maybe volunteered to help at this place or done something, you know. But I wasn't like that.

CGW: But you were brave enough to come, though, and that says a lot.

GGH: I didn't really think of it as being brave.

A Small Community of Women

CGW: How did you think of it?

GGH: I loved MIT and I had a good time. I thought we were it, you know — going to MIT, me and the other girls out there. We really thought that was the top, going to MIT.

CGW: What did you love about it?

GGH: Oh, just everything. I loved the people mostly. I liked the Boston area. We were always going some place.

CGW: When you say you loved the people, who do you mean?

GGH: The girls, they were very nice people. All of us in the freshman class were very friendly — except one girl I remember, and she's probably still up there too. I think her husband taught there. I think there were two girls. She was friendly, but you weren't close to her like you were to some of the others. There were two of them like that — one girl from Connecticut, and this girl was from the Boston area. Her name was Betty Ann.² I can't remember her last name. She married

²Two possibilities--Betty Ann Ferguson (later Lehmann), class of 1953; and Betty-Ann Sabin (later Reid), class of 1954.

somebody there. Somehow I have the impression that they left there, but I don't know.

Then there was another girl. I can't remember her name, but I remember she had red hair and freckles and she was sort of cold. She always claimed that her mother had a cat that talked. I believed her too. She wasn't the type to imagine things. She said that one day her mother was standing in front of the mirror putting her hat on and the cat said, "Going out?" I believed her. She wasn't the type to play or make jokes, so you'd have to believe her.

CGW: Do you recall having any racial discomfort at that place?

GGH: I remember the man who was the dean of students. Nobody ever said anything at MIT and most people were very, very nice. But he was cool, you know, not friendly like everybody else. He didn't do anything. He did everything perfectly correctly, but he was very cold about it.

CGW: In other words, he didn't do anything outwardly to show additional kind of support. He was just neutral, so to speak.

GGH: Yes. He didn't do anything negative, but he was just very cold.

CGW: You came in September 1949, right?

GGH: Yes.

CGW: You stayed until, what, the end of 1951?

GGH: No, actually I think I flunked out my first semester. Was it the first semester or second? I think it was the first semester. I went to a junior college out there and I still lived in the dormitory. I went to a junior college and then I reapplied and went back the next year. Then I think I went for a year.

CGW: You never did reapply to MIT, though, did you?

GGH: After the second time, no.

CGW: You reapplied a second time.

GGH: Next year.

CGW: And you came back?

GGH: Yes.

CGW: September 1950 it was, I assume.

GGH: Yes.

Subsequent Black Women, Late 1960s

CGW: It was around 1968 that black students at MIT started to come in larger numbers. Specifically, one of the most important persons in that group was a woman by the name of Shirley Jackson, who came from Washington as well. I believe her high school was Dunbar High School too. She was the valedictorian of the class and she came to MIT in 1964. She graduated in 1968. She and one other black woman, Jennifer Rudd, were two black women in the class of 1968. They finished in 1968, but during that time they made a lot of demands on the Institute – one being that there needed to be a program established whereby the black students could get academic support in a way that they could survive, for lots of reasons. Those programs that they demanded that the Institute did at that time, around 1968, are still intact now.

GGH: Is that right?

CGW: Yes. That is, when you come to MIT now as a student – as a black student – they look at your background. If you have taken math, which all of them have, they can tell to a certain degree some of the needs that you will have in order to get past that first year, particularly calculus and physics. What they have done now is that they have you come during the summer before your freshman year, and they then go through all the calculus and so forth to bring you up to date so that when you come in your freshman year you will be more familiar with calculus and so forth.

GGH: I know that most of the other girls who were freshmen had had some calculus in high school.

CGW: Right. And see, that was part of the problem. Any student who comes there who has not had calculus today would have a tremendous problem. The only way that he or she would probably be able to stay is to go through that summer program and take that calculus in order to put them up on the same level like everybody else. I think it's important to say that because again, as you can see, the fact is that it just probably did not exist – that high-level math – at Dunbar at the time you finished.

GGH: No, it didn't.

CGW: You took all of the math that they had available there. I suspect that if they had had a prep course for your summer – or even for the freshman year, which they do have to a certain extent now – you would have, I am sure, been able to handle that without any difficulty.

GGH: My biggest problem, though, was that I didn't know how to study more, or recognize the need for all this studying. I was living in a dormitory where everybody was studying. I'd be studying too, but if anybody wanted to do something they'd come and get me – if they wanted to go out and get ice cream or whatever. I really can't say it was all lack of preparation, you know. It was just that I didn't study enough.

CGW: But you did enjoy it, though.

GGH: Oh yes, I really did. I still look back at it in very high terms.

CGW: So much so that I think I hear you saying that you would even encourage your daughter to go to MIT, is that right?

GGH: I would have and would still. She wants to get her PhD now. I would encourage her to go there now, but I don't think that she could go because – like she said – it's too cold.

After MIT: Nurturing a Family

CGW: Tell me a little more about your daughters and your children.

GGH: Well, I have six children – three boys, three girls. My girls have all graduated from college. My daughter whom you met has two master's degrees. She graduated from Howard. She's my youngest daughter. She graduated from Howard and then she went to Stanford and got a master's in mechanical engineering. She had a bachelor's in mechanical engineering.

CGW: She went all the way over to the west coast.

GGH: Right after she got there they had the earthquake too.

CGW: I know you were worried about that.

GGH: It really upset her too. I had to go out there a couple of times because she said she was going to come home. Somebody drove her car out there and wrecked it on the way. You know how you get these services to drive? Anyway, they wrecked the car, so she was out there with no car. She had a hard year-and-a-half. Then she came back to Howard. She decided she didn't like mechanical

engineering, so she came back to Howard and got another master's in computer science. Then she went to Georgia Tech. She wanted to get her PhD down there, but she has a daughter who's almost six. She just had a hard time managing her daughter and going to school and working and all that stuff. She worked there for about a year or a year-and-a-half and then she dropped out. But that's what she wants to do now, go back and do her PhD because she wants to teach.

My oldest daughter has three children and she got a degree in accounting at the University of the District of Columbia. She started off at Howard, but she was having too much fun so she went to UDC and finished there. She worked for two architectural firms in their accounting departments. After she had her children, there just seemed to be too much of a strain, so she works at a private school now. She works almost full-time.

My other daughter got one of those ABC scholarships in high school.

CGW: A Better Chance?

GGH: Yes.

CGW: Oh yes. My wife used to work for A Better Chance.

GGH: So my daughter went to Choate Rosemary. When she graduated, she came back here and went to Georgetown.

CGW: A very good school.

GGH: I wanted her to go to Yale, but she was tired of being away from home by then, you know.

CGW: Where is that prep school?

GGH: It's in Connecticut – Wallingford, near New Haven. She got her degree in French and Spanish, if I'm not mistaken. She joined the Peace Corps after she graduated. She was in Cameroon for two years. Now she works for a Peace Corps-type group called PAST. She does a lot of traveling back and forth to Africa, places like Africa and Dominica. She goes to Africa two or three times a year. She hasn't been this year. She hasn't done too much traveling this year. She has a lot of African friends. She likes that kind of work, but I guess everybody gets tired of their job. That's her main thing, "I'm tired of this job."

My boys? My husband died in 1979, so my oldest one dropped out of school. He doesn't do much of anything. My mother gave him an apartment building not too far from here, so he lives over there and sort of keeps it. My

second son started off at Catholic University. My youngest two sons went to Catholic high school. This one went to Catholic University. He used to play basketball, but he dropped out of Catholic. He has been trying to start his own business, but he doesn't really do much of anything either. My third, my youngest son, is doing the best of all of them. He went to Howard for about a year and then dropped out. None of them seems to be interested in what school has to offer.

My oldest one really disappointed me because he's the smartest of all my children, but he has no interest. He wants to work with his hands, but he doesn't have any aptitude for it. I don't tell him that. He'd like to do carpentry. He'll do the stupidest things that anyone with common sense would know, "You don't do that, you do it the other way." But that's what he wants to do. Really, he's the smartest of all my children. They'll tell you that too. But he doesn't want to go to school. He'd love to start his own business, like building houses or something, but he really doesn't have the aptitude for it. But you can't tell him that. The youngest one buys and sells used cars. He's good with his hands. He can take a wreck and make it look like a new car. That's what he does. He buys old cars and fixes them up. He does very well.

Odd Juxtapositions

CGW: Well, you have a very fine family. It's not easy to bring up a family of six as well as you've been able to do, particularly with your husband passing in 1979. That would require a lot of work to try and make things work out.

Do you have any sense about one person in your class? There was a person in your class—in fact, your picture is right next to his.

GGH: You mean at Dunbar?

CGW: No, at MIT.

GGH: What picture?

CGW: Your freshman yearbook.

GGH: I don't have a freshman yearbook. I don't remember anything about it.

CGW: Well, you have a picture in your freshman yearbook, class of 1954, and your picture is right next to a man by the name of Paul E. Gray. I guess because of Gloria Green and Paul Gray—you know, the G's—your pictures are right next to each other. Paul Gray, who was in your class, became president of MIT.

GGH: I was thinking that that name sounded familiar. He was president.

CGW: It was very interesting. I looked at the yearbook and saw your picture, and Paul's picture right next to yours. He's one of the persons who helped to give me the money to be able to try and work on this project. He served as president for ten years, from 1980 to 1990. He then stepped down and became chairman of the Corporation, chairman of the board of directors. He just stepped down from that position in June of this year. He has now gone back to the classroom. He actually is a professor in the department of electrical engineering. I gave a seminar this spring, and I had your picture and his and he was in the audience. It was really very interesting because I made the point that here was Gloria Green and here was Paul Gray side by side.

Black Women Pioneers at MIT

You are actually the second black woman we have been able to identify who came to MIT, did you know that?

GGH: When I went there, everybody told me I was the first one. That's what they all thought.

CGW: Your class people told you that.

GGH: Yes, people at Dunbar.

CGW: People at Dunbar told you that?

GGH: That's what they all thought. But then I saw something in the paper about a woman who graduated in the '30s, 1936 or something like that, in chemistry? There was something about her in the *Post* some years ago. That was the first one, and I said, "Oh, I wasn't the first one."

CGW: She actually didn't finish either.

GGH: The person I'm talking about I think finished. I thought that she finished.

CGW: The woman we identified had a brother at MIT also.

GGH: Was she from the Boston area?

CGW: Yes she was.

GGH: Well, maybe it's the same person because this one was from the Boston area.

CGW: If it's the same person, she didn't do well at MIT, but she went on to be a very excellent math teacher in the Boston public school system.

GGH: The one I'm talking about, it seems like she was in some field like chemistry. I shouldn't even be saying this because I don't remember that clearly, but it seemed to me like it was connected to some kind of work she was doing maybe here in DC.

CGW: You may be right. But anyway, it's clear that you are – as best as we can tell – the second black woman to be admitted and come to MIT.

Is there anything you could say perhaps that would be of interest to young black students who would be coming to MIT, that you would like to convey to them – specifically, I would say, to black women as well because of who you are? Is there anything you think would be helpful to the next generation of black young folks who would be coming to a place like MIT? MIT hasn't changed that much since you've been there, as you may know. It stays pretty much the same.

GGH: Children today are different. I think they know how hard they have to work and what they have to do. Most of them seem to. That's the main thing I would say, just to be aware that you have to be serious and you have to work.

Support Programs, Now and (Not) Then

CGW: What would you say about the quality of our services at the time you were there, including support programs?

GGH: I don't remember any support programs. What kind of support programs?

CGW: Say if you had a problem with your living quarters or if you had a problem with your academic work, today there are places to go. Almost anything you have an issue with there's a place that you could go to talk to someone about it.

GGH: Well, I don't think it was like that then. Just for anybody, I think you were more or less on your own. If you had a problem with your living quarters – you know, like for women there was only that one dormitory – if you didn't like it, you'd have to get some other place to live.

CGW: So there was nothing like the dean of students? Today the dean of students has about ten people on the staff – professional people – who are there simply to have students who want to come by and talk to them about any

problems, any issues they have. That did not exist during that time, you don't think?

GGH: I don't remember it. I don't know whether it was just me, not being the type to take advantage of something like that or whether it didn't exist. I don't really remember anything like that.

CGW: Well, part of it also too is not that the student would necessarily have to remember but at least today we think that it's the professional people's responsibility to let you know that we are here to be of assistance to you. For example, every student who comes on campus gets a brochure of all the available services – phone numbers and everything that you can make contact with if you have any question. It doesn't have to be anything really major wrong with you. It's if you have a problem, if you just don't know where you do X, Y, Z. There are professional people there whom you can go to and just ask a simple question. But do I hear you saying you don't recall anything like that?

GGH: No, I don't.

MIT, "The Best of Everything"

CGW: Well, that certainly does exist now. When you look at it, if you had to say what was best about your experience at MIT, what would you say?

GGH: Well, we always had good teachers. They were excellent. The teachers were really excellent. They really had the best of everything, like lab equipment or whatever. I just liked the whole atmosphere. I went back to UDC after my husband died and I got a degree in mechanical engineering, but there was really a world of difference between their abilities and MIT's abilities.

CGW: So you actually did get a degree in mechanical engineering?

GGH: Yes.

Professional Aspirations, Work Experience

CGW: Is that what you thought you were going to major in when you were at MIT?

GGH: No, I didn't want to get a degree in mechanical engineering. I wanted to get a degree in architecture. I probably should have, but UDC didn't offer it. They had some architecture courses, but they didn't offer a degree in it.

CGW: So you sort of knew what you wanted to do. You wanted to get a degree in architecture when you came to MIT?

GGH: Oh yes. I always wanted to be an architect.

CGW: And there is some of that kind of architectural skills in some parts of mechanical engineering as well, I suspect.

GGH: Yes, but not many.

CGW: Have you used that mechanical engineering since you got your degree?

GGH: No, no. When I left MIT, I tried to get a job working for an architect but at the time I couldn't. So I finally started working at a bookkeeping job, mechanical and electromechanical drafts. And that's what I've always done, you know.

CGW: Was that with the city or with the federal government?

GGH: Federal government, mostly. Then I tried working as a contractor for private groups. I worked for a lab for about ten or fifteen years altogether. I worked then for about five, six, seven years – worked for private companies that did government contracting. Then I went back to the lab. When I left there, I worked for other private companies.

CGW: Is there any other topic or issue that comes to mind, as you reflect back on your own experience and on the experience of other blacks at MIT?

GGH: I couldn't influence my own daughter to go there. The only thing I can say is that it was a wonderful experience for me. Maybe I'll work on it some more.

CGW: Well, that would be great because you really do have a legacy there that your daughters and sons have all the reason to be very proud of. Obviously, you have quite tremendous ability and you've done a wonderful job in working with them. It shows who you are and I can see why you were at MIT and at that early period. That says more than anything that people could say, just by the mere fact that you were there.