Oral History of Derrick Brown

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McIlwain: Perfect. I'm Charlton McIlwain here with Marc Weber, and we are speaking today with Derrick Brown. Derrick, can I get you to start off, tell us your full name and where you're from?

Brown: All right. My full name is Derrick Spencer Brown, and I am from Elloree, South Carolina. It's E-L-L-O-R-E-E. It's in the middle of South Carolina, about an hour from Charleston, [an] hour to the west of Charleston, and maybe 45 minutes to the east of Columbia, the capital city.

McIlwain: All right. So let's start there. Tell us a little bit about your family growing up in Elloree. What was your family life like, who was around?

Brown: We grew up on a farm. It was like a cross between a farm and a homestead. My dad got an acre of land right in front of my grandmother's house, so that's where we lived. She lived behind us and her oldest daughter lived behind her. My cousins lived across the street, so all of us lived in the same area on 80 acres in rural South Carolina, so we worked the land, grew corn and vegetables and we harvested-- we farmed pigs, cows, chickens. We had it all, and that made life pretty simple, pretty quiet and a little boring, so I developed a lot of imagination dreaming about where I wanted to be, especially on days where we had to work the fields, because you're going to be out there for a long time and the sun's hot and you're thinking about where you would rather be, so that's where I learned how to dream and that's probably become a great skill of mine, but it was honed out there in the fields.

McIlwain: And was part of your mom, your dad's aspirations for you that you would continue with that in some way, or certainly for the time being? Sounds like you had work responsibilities there.

Brown: Yeah, I think-- yeah, I think they wanted me to do something other than that life, and the work ethic that it instilled helped me in what I would eventually go on to do. My mom was a teacher who went back to school after she had me, so I spent a lot of my early years in college with my mom, and that cultivated an interest in higher education because I was around it all the time. My aunt, my mom's older sister, was the Director of Career Services at South Carolina State College. It's now South Carolina State University, but between the two of them I was influenced to achieve and study and just know that my path would eventually include some form of higher education. Now my dad was an electrical technician in addition to being a farmer. He was a trained electrical technician, so he kind of taught me how to see and how to ask questions and investigate and how to fix things, how to value having things that work, and between my mom's influence and my dad's influence I kind of became the combination of their talents and their influence.

Weber: And brothers and sisters?

Brown: Yeah, I had two sisters. I had an older sister about two years older than me. Her name is Tonya, and I had a younger sister who's about 11 years younger than me. Her name is Tessa.

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McIlwain: And so what-- tell me a little bit about what y'all did around the house. You talked a little bit about, you know, obviously out in the fields, out working during the day. When you weren't working, what were you doing, you and your sisters?

Brown: Well, I played with my older sister a lot, but then we kind of began to not get along very well and our dad would kind of come up with jobs where she would be working in one part of the house and then I would take care of most of what was going on outside, like cutting grass, cutting wood and trimming hedges. Anything you could think of that could be done outside, that was my job, to take care of all the animals, and once my baby sister came along, we were so much older than she was then we kind of handled most of the chores and she just got loved on a lot. A lot.

McIlwain: Mm. What'd you do for fun?

Brown: Played a lot of basketball. We had a pretty big yard, and I had a full-court basketball court. On dirt, but it was a full court, so a lot of kids in the neighborhood would come to my house to play because I had the equipment and I had the space, and we had a good time. They would come by pretty much every day and then when they weren't there, I had cousins across the street. We'd ride bicycles. I had a little motorcycle when I was younger that I used to ride without a helmet. Used to fall off of it all the time and didn't think anything of it because I was always riding on dirt roads. Lots of dirt roads connected all the fields on the land that we had to the adjacent land, so we would just ride those dirt roads and discover rattlesnakes and raccoons. We'd get into all kinds of stuff, and it never phased me because that's just what I saw every day. You see a snake, you just kind of--

McIlwain: Right.

Brown: --avoid it and keep riding.

McIlwain: Keep on going. Keep on going. So it sounds like you're obviously in a small town, but sounds like a pretty tight-knit community. You said you got other family there, cousins. Sounds like a place where everybody kind of knows everybody?

Brown: Yeah, everybody knew everybody, and we all lived near each other. You're living near your entire family for the most part. My dad's family was very large. He was one of nine children and his family compound, if you will, was about eight miles from my mom's family compound, so we always saw each other.

McIlwain: Mm. Got you. But what was-- going back to your mom and dad, and you mentioned some about your aunt as well and, you know, what were some of the key kinds of things that they talked to you about or principles they tried to instill in you at an early age? What were some of those, those values and so forth that were important to them but became important to you?

Brown: All of my elders were smart and smart in different ways. I would say my Aunt Cynthia, my mom's older sister, and my mom, Diane, and their baby sister, Sheila, they were all very scholarly, very book

smart. My great-grandfather, Henry Bonaparte, was a very spiritual man who knew the land and knew the lay of the land. He's a very good singer and very great storyteller. I just remember him telling me things. He would say some things over and over again and he would quote the Bible and he would quote song lyrics, and I just came to understand that any time he said anything to me it was kind of what I call a master class now. I would know he was saying things to me with a clarity and an urgency that meant I should probably listen. So I was with him for the first 25 years of my life. So if you have a great-grandfather for 25 years, they're going to tell you a lot of stuff, because I think to them time is of the essence and they might be on the downward path of their lives and they want to make sure that you get to your arc and your path the best way that they can get you there.

I had my grandfather with me for about maybe the first 12 years of my life, but I think when I met him, he was older. He and my grandmother had separated for several years and when he came back into our lives he was very urgent about spending time with me and telling me things, and the storyteller that I am told that I am, a lot of that comes from remembering that there were some things that they told me over and over again. They would say things like, "Hey, don't mistake activity for achievement," and that's such a short statement even as a kid you kind of understand, "Okay, they're saying just because you're doing something, that doesn't mean you're getting anything done. I wonder if they've seen something in the way that I work where they're kind of giving me a hint?" So I used to wonder about stuff like that, but they would say it so many times I came to understand, "Ah, this is just a truth. It's a maxim in their lives and they're sharing it with me and they're not sharing it with me in any snide way. They're just telling me, 'There's some things you want to make sure you do, and there's some things you want to make sure you don't do, and you don't want to invest a lot of energy in doing a whole lot of nothing.'" Yes, that makes sense.

McIlwain: Hm. Indeed. I can imagine being in Elloree, South Carolina, there must've been some racial politics around in your community, adjacent communities, things happen across the country, particularly when you got grandfathers and great-grandfathers around that they communicated. What was some of that like for you?

Brown: Now, this is strange. I now know what went on in my community for the last hundred years. I know now. When I was younger, they said nothing about anything of the sort. I had to learn, and learn on my own. Elloree was a hotbed of civil rights activity, white supremacy activity. My mother integrated the local school, the local high school. Elloree High School did not accept black students until 1960-- I want to say '68, and she was the first, and she volunteered to be the first, and when I came to learn all of this, I learned it all in 2015. That was the 50th anniversary of the first student being allowed into the Elloree public school system, and I think that student might've been in the fifth grade or something like that, but my mom said that she wanted to go to the integrated school simply because her training school did not have good books. They got the books from the public school, and those books were usually prepared and presented, if you get my drift. Now, they were marked with epithets. They were torn and ripped and shredded and then handed to the students at the training school, and she said that that was her chief motivation for volunteering for what would become a pretty harrowing experience that she told me about when I was of age. In 2015, I was 45 years old. So yeah, she told me about all of this when I was 45 years old, even down to the crosses being burned in her yard inviting her to go back to the

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training school and to leave the public school. She told me about Julius Rosenwald and how he was the founder of Sears and Roebuck, and he built her school, and he built several schools all over the South. It was a lifetime of education that I didn't come to until I was a grown man, but it sticks, and it made me go back and read, and I was surprised at how much I found about my very small, teeny-weeny hometown and the presence of the White Citizens Council and what the farmers went through when the farmers joined the NAACP, what the teachers at the local schools went through when they joined the NAACP. Everybody was kind of put through the wringer, and several of the teachers were part of a pretty landmark case that the NAACP got involved in, the Legal Defense Fund, in helping them keep their jobs because they had been threatened with being fired because they had joined the NAACP. So there was a lot going on in Elloree, our small little town.

McIlwain: Mm. But it sounds like you all were shielded from that by your parents and then you didn't particularly pick up on much of it. Just sort of just living, living your life.

Brown: Yeah, yeah, and I get it. I get it. If I had known, that might've been a lot to carry and who knows how it might've impacted me now that I know the arc of my own life and some of the things that I went through, but now that I kind of know and understand all of it, I have an urgency myself now of I have a child now, and I know not to say everything to her about what I've experienced, but to use the art of storytelling to make her aware, make her aware in a way that allows her to change what she can change and sustain everything else and kind of figure out which things she changes and which things she sustains. That's an art and a useful life skill and you have to coach them into that the right way, and I think my folks tried to coach me into it the best way they can. That's what I'll do for my child, and I'm informed by the experience of how they brought me into knowing what I know now.

McIlwain: Yeah, yeah. So clearly your mom, your whole family, education is a key value, especially hearing these stories about her own schooling experience, et cetera. So what was school like for you when you started to elementary school and started on up? What was your educational experience like?

Brown: School was an odd experience. That's the best way I can put it. I was schooled at home and schooled very well. My mother was a kindergarten teacher, so there's a lot that I knew by the time I showed up on day one at school, so a lot of days I'd be pulled away from the other kids. I'd be tested for every level of gifting that they could test me for. They discovered that I could read in kindergarten, so we would have flashcards that-- this is-- I didn't know what they were, but they would hold up pictures, and the pictures would have the word. Like, I remember a picture of a ramp and I didn't know what a ramp was but I saw R-A-M-P at the bottom of the card, so I told my teacher, "Hey, that's a ramp," and that earned me my first battery of tests where they had to figure out what was wrong with this child, because "you're not supposed to know all this stuff yet," and we're in a small town, so I don't think I'm any smarter than anybody else, any smarter than the next man. I have a level of experience though that might exceed some of my counterparts, and looking back, that was one of the most powerful lessons I would learn and continue to learn in my life. When we see people stratified according to intelligence and abilities, you recognize even ability is something that's enhanced through experience. So maybe nobody's smarter or dumber than anybody else. Maybe everybody differs in their level of experience, so if you can bolster experience, you might be able to make anybody look smart.

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McIlwain: Mm. Did you have any favorite teachers?

Brown: Yes, sir, yes, sir, yes, sir. <laughs>

McIlwain: Growing up?

Brown: My first favorite teacher was Ms. Dorothy Parler. That's my second-grade teacher, and I loved her, and I was mortally afraid of her because she was so serious about learning. When you made mistakes, she had a ruler, maybe like an 18-inch ruler, and she would come and <smacks> pop you on the knuckles if you didn't recognize the diacritical marks in the dictionary. She taught us how to use the dictionary. I'll never forget that. And she taught us parts of speech. She was hooked on phonics in 1977, and she taught us to read phonetically, and she taught us to read and spell using that dictionary, and I don't think anybody else in my life, outside of my mom, taught me the way Ms. Parler did and got the best out of me, and she got the best out of me largely through fear. I was afraid to not do it the way that she showed us how to do it, and I think I flourished under her, and I think she recognized what my gifts were, and she recommended that they start accelerating me. So most of the time I was in second grade I would spend in third grade classes and when I was in third grade they'd send me to fourth grade all day, and then I finally-- I skipped a grade so that I could kind of get back on track and I was small for my age, so once I skipped a grade I was even smaller than everybody else and that made me brave in a lot of ways and that made me fearful in a lot of ways because I've always been a talker, and when I'm the smallest of the smallest and I can speak like I'm the largest, that's going to get me into a lot of trouble, and over the years I've learned to harness that. I can speak my piece, right, but I speak peace as well, and that keeps me out of the trouble that I used to get into when I was younger and smaller.

McIlwain: Yeah. Sounds like that teacher really had a big impact, particularly the fear that you had of her that seemed to really, as you say, produce something that was enhancing for you, that is your gift and an interest in words and writing and speaking and all those things that sound like came out of that particular class.

Brown: Yeah, she has a daughter, Beverly, and Beverly now looks exactly like Miss Dorothy, so at this ceremony I mentioned a while ago, the anniversary of the integration of the schools, Beverly Parler came and spoke at that event and she walked in while I was on stage because I had been asked to speak as well, and when she walked in I forget what I was talking about but I just stopped and I started talking about her mama because she looked just like her mama. Just like.

McIlwain: Wow. And there was a… if I'm recalling correctly, there was a moment fairly early on when you ended up in a-- was it a writing contest, that was a statewide kind of event?

Brown: Yeah, yeah.

McIlwain: Tell us little bit about that.

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Brown: Yeah, this would've been 1979. I'm in fifth grade in 1979, and South Carolina elected its first woman, female, to statewide office. Her name was Nancy Stevenson. She was elected Lieutenant Governor and she had a keen interest in writing, so she sponsored writing contests across the state, and essay writing contests, expository writing. I didn't know what any of this stuff was until I read about the contest, and that year I had a teacher, her name was Agnes Brandenburg, my fifth-grade teacher. She was a wordsmith, so she told me that the word "essay," she said it was a French word and that it meant "to try." So, she said, "Expository writing is all about trying to explain or expose someone to new ideas. You're trying. You're making an earnest attempt to efficiently introduce somebody to an idea, a thought, in a persuasive way." I said okay. I get that. I get that. I get that. So, she asked me what I wanted to write about, and I said, "Well, if I get to choose, I want to write about baseball. I love baseball." So, she said, "Okay. What are you going to try to explain?" It's, "Okay. I'll try to explain why baseball is like the best sport of them all." Now I don't think that anymore. I kind of think football is the greatest sport of them all, but when I was nine, I loved baseball, largely because of my grandfather.

So, I wrote an essay about how much I loved baseball. I won this contest and I got to meet Nancy Stevenson, not at the State House. I think we went to our local county courthouse, and she introduced herself. She told me who she was as a person. She told me who she was historically and all of that stuck with me, so I got the chance to be in that contest again in 1982. I'm in eighth grade in 1982, and I win that contest again. So those two experiences kind of told me when I was young that of all the things that I'm able to do, it sounds like I'm pretty good at explaining and using the written word to explain, and then in later years I come by this definition of writing as organized thought. So, I said, "Okay. Well, if you're able to write, that must mean I'm pretty good at thinking as well. That must mean I'm pretty organized."

So now life is starting to take shape in my mind insofar as what I can do because I know my skills, and that experience, looking back on it, is a powerful experience to share with my child. As my child, who's in the third grade now, starts to flourish and discover that she can do all kinds of things I can kind of focus her and say, "Your skills are activities that come naturally to you, that come easily to you, you want to do them, and you will learn by studying your interests, and you will study some interests that become more interesting than others. Those will become your passions. Your passions will lead you to purpose, and once you discover why you're here, once you discover your "why", you're going to be a pretty prominent person because you will pursue your "why". And if you can discover that when you're young, you're going to live a very prominent life. Whether that includes riches or not you'll have the wealth of knowledge of who you are and what you're supposed to do while you're here." But yeah, all of that kind of grew out of that writing experience for me.

McIlwain: So, 11, 12 years old you're starting to become very clear about what you're good at, what your skills are. Did you have a sense at that time of what you thought you might want to be at that point?

Brown: Yeah. Now, that's when I went on my own rabbit trail, because I knew what I was good at but my mind, my MO then, was to translate the skills into some type of profession. We had this computer at our

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school in 1982[1]. It was… I forget the fancy name for it. It was some type of online information system that allowed you to explore careers, so I would go to the library every chance I got and take the little survey, interest survey, and try to do the interest survey in different ways, provide different answers and see what it told me I should be when I grew up, and I would always get careers like, you know, principal. I would get something at the time called system analyst. Didn't know what that was. I would get systems engineer. I wanted to get something more specific in engineering so I eventually learned how to answer the questions so that it said, "Hey, maybe you should focus on electrical engineering," and that then became my dream, maybe not for all the right reasons, but I said, "Okay. I've got this aptitude for math, this aptitude for writing. I've got an aptitude for organization, analysis. Yeah. I'm going to become an electrical engineer." Now, if you asked me today what I would want to be, I would say, "You know what, I would've stuck with being a writer and I would've gone as far with that as I could." The reason why I didn't when I was 12 years old is I looked at how much writers made according to this online information system and who knows where they got their information, but the information provided to me said, "Son, you're going to know a mighty struggle as a professional writer unless you're Ernest Hemingway." So, I steered away from that and I steered toward something that looked like it was going to pay me some money, and I put my hand up and say, "Boy, I wish I hadn't done that," but I did. I did.

McIlwain: Yep. Sound like a natural path given the information provided. So, you mentioned going to library, interacting with this computer to get the kind of information on careers you wanted. Was that your first experience with computers or what followed that in terms of you start looking at computers as a tool very specifically personally?

Brown: Yeah. I think two years before that-- now, this would've been 1980[2]. I'm in sixth grade in 1980. My mom bought an Apple computer. Think it was the Apple IIe, and it was a day that will live in infamy because when she brought it home, she and my dad had an extended discussion about how much it cost. So, I'm listening, so I hear it cost about $5,000, and I remember my dad saying, "That's like buying a car," and then I found out that my mom had actually financed it. She was paying for that computer like she was buying a car, but she bought it because she wanted to learn how to use it, she wanted us to learn how to use it, and it was an Apple computer, so it catered to the wonderful user experience even back then, and I found it easy to use for the things I was able to do. It had a program called AppleWorks, and AppleWorks had a word processor - straightforward enough. Now instead of me writing my essays and tracing them on lineless paper with my pen, I can type them. Okay. I like that. It had a database. I don't know what a database is, but I like to make organized lists of collections. I like to write down all the cassette tapes that I have. I like to write down all the books that I have, and then I find out, "Okay. Well, that's what databases are, man, it's collection of organized, related information. That's what a database is." And then it had a spreadsheet, and it would be years before I actually understood what a spreadsheet was, but what it looked like was a combination of a calculator and a word processor. I can see that, so I could be that. I used AppleWorks all the time. It also had a compiler, some type of compiler, I don't know what it was called, where you could write code, and I tried that a couple of times

[1] [from Derrick Brown] I think this was 1983 (my ninth-grade year). The online tool was SCOIS (S.C. Occupational Information System) - South Carolina's official career resource network.
[2] [from Derrick Brown] I think we bought the Apple IIe in 1983.

and I said, “Okay. This is Greek it me. I’m not sure I like this idea of writing code. I think I’m going to stick to AppleWorks.” AppleWorks allows me to be productive and confident because I understand what it is. I can conceptualize what it is. I can tell somebody else what it is. This programming stuff, I'm not so sure about.

So that was my introduction to computing and then I kind of figured out nobody around us really had computers, nobody at my school had computers except the school itself and they were computers that we didn’t really have access to. The only access I had to the career computer was through the library. The librarian would collect your interest on a sheet of paper. She would go and type everything into the computer and she would bring you back the information that you were provided. Now I look at experiences like that now and I say, "Oh, man, my librarian was the gatekeeper" and I like to remove gatekeepers wherever I find them. I didn't know that she was the gatekeeper back in those days, but I know how to recognize gatekeepers now.

McIlwain: And so, what did-- what did you do knowing, knowing, you know, she's a gatekeeper keeping folks at bay or deciding who gets access and who doesn't? How did you use your access to the computer early on when your mom got you that Apple IIe, you know, what did you build with it? You talked about some of the programs that you used. What was the next step in terms of that, getting you towards, you know, this is a way to create something or get you to express what you like to do, what your strengths are, some of those things?

Brown: Well, the first database I made was a career database. The reason why I would complete the survey in different ways was because I knew it would provide me different perspectives on career options and I'd bring those sheets of paper home and I'd put them all in my little database. It wasn't a fancy database, but it allowed me to organize and aggregate everything that I was getting from the librarian as she handed it to me one sheet at a time. I kept all those sheets, came home, and typed all that stuff in. And then one day, I sat down and read it. I said, "Oh, I can actually see the collections-- the related interests, how some of these interests all kind of aligned around math, science-type things like the system analysts, the system engineers. Oh, those are very related to engineering," and I would learn some years after that that they were very related. But all of that I was introduced to kind of analyzing and synthesizing all of that by just bringing it home and putting it in a database. And I was-- I was hooked after that. It's like databases, that's, this is-- I like this. I like this.

McIlwain: So at some point after that, you know, this picture started to form around engineering, electrical engineering, computers that are in the mix in the same way that, you know, that card and reading those words kind of got you on some people's maps as a kindergartener, it sounds like these kinds of things for you got you on the map to some other folks, particularly at Clemson University, who reached out and there was some programs that you started as a high schooler that was a result of this and how to kind of then channel some of that. Can you tell us a little bit about…?

Brown: Yeah. Now Clemson has a summer program called the Clemson Career Workshop and its aim and scope is very straightforward. You were brought to Clemson for two weeks to try college along with other people who would like to try college. You're all from rural areas of South Carolina and you're the

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best and brightest at your respective school and you come together, and you spend two weeks together for consecutive summers. And that turned into a magical and mystical experience that changed my life, especially being around other kids who were performing at a high level from other schools in areas as impoverished and as rural as the area I was from, and I now see that as a masterful way to recruit students. And I'm sure they saw some of that but I, I don't think they could foresee the impact that that program had on me and a lot of folks who had been my classmates who are now my friends as we have all come back together and talked about and understood how powerful an experience that was and how that program is one you keep around forever. And that disappeared for a few years, but it's back and at full strength at Clemson now. But that gave me my introduction to college life and at Clemson I found hey, this is an environment not that different from my home, but then it's different at the same time because of the people I'm able to be around. I think I might want to go to a school just like this. That was a powerful recruiting experience.

McIlwain: And so those two years, what were some of the things that you did as part of that program? What were some of the kinds of the everyday assignments and tasks and learning and that kind of thing?

Brown: Yeah. We went to actual classes. I went to a digital logic class that was taught by Dr. John Komo and Dr. John Komo would become my digital logics teacher during my sophomore year. And that's when it clicked. "Oh. We're in-- We were in actual classes. When I was in tenth grade, he was introducing me to the “and” gates and “or” gates and the chips that these functions were executed onto, and he introduced us to all of that. When we were in high school, we took a public speaking course and that's when I realized I had the gift of gab but I was in a shell and I was terrified to be in front of certain groups of people. Now who are these people? I think I'm terrified to say anything in front of females. Yeah. I’m not great but when I'm in front of an audience and I see females in the audience. I got to discover and confront stuff like that when I was in high school. We had a computer science class and as much as I knew about databases and spreadsheets and word processing in that computer science class, we're focused on algorithms and coding and I'm not sure I know much about coding. I knew more about algorithms than I thought. But when I took the test at the end of that computer science class, I didn't do well at all and that got me shaky to where I said, "Well, I want to be an engineer and engineers certainly use computers. I'm not sure I'd ever try to be a computer engineer or a computer scientist. They seem to be a little deep off into this thing. I want to-- want to kind of stay away from that." But still, you got to see it all before entering the hallowed halls and moving towards matriculation, you got to see it and you got to make informed decisions about what you saw. The most informed decisions you might be able to make when you're 15 or 16-years-old and that's…

McIlwain: Indeed, indeed. So how did you then get to Clemson, obviously? You end up as an undergraduate. Were you, did you consider other places to go? Had you made up your mind that engineering was the way to go? What was the lead in that got you to Clemson?

Brown: I was on an engineering track all four years I was in high school and the only other school that I seriously considered was Georgia Tech. So I went to Georgia Tech on its National Merit Scholar weekend. I was a National Achievement Scholar, but they also invited me to National Merit Weekend. So, I got to rub shoulders with all the National Merit semifinalists who had shown up for the weekend and we

all went to a chemistry class. And that chemistry class was taught via video. So, I sat in that class and saw more people than I had ever seen in one room in my life and tried to imagine taking notes from a professor who was coming to me via video and it freaked me out. That experience told me man, I'm a-- we're not going to Georgia Tech. At Clemson, it's a little more hands-on and I see people. I don't see video. Now I know better now, but in 1986, that told me do not go here, go here. And that's how I picked Clemson over Georgia Tech. That's not scientific but that's how I picked my school.

McIlwain: Yeah. Had a sense of wanting to engage with real people, instructors, et cetera.

Brown: Yeah. I went to Georgia Tech for grad school, man, and I fell in love with the video professor in grad school because that gives you an opportunity to go to class, get confused, go grab that tape, watch the whole thing again for the first time. That was my ace in the hole in grad school. So that's again the value of experience. I didn't know what I was seeing in 1986, but then when I got there for grad school in 1992, I said, "Okay, give this a second look because this is going to get you through grad school."

McIlwain: Yeah. Yeah, you were ready for it by that point. So, let's talk a little bit about Clemson. What was it like for you as a student, particularly those first, you know, year, couple years as you're getting your footing, you're figuring out what this, you know, this place is all about, what you're doing, who your professors are, what classes are like? What was your early experience at Clemson like?

Brown: Well, I was accepted into the Honors College, it was called, the Calhoun Honors College, and that allowed me to live in a dorm that was on top of a big hill and the dorm was called the Clemson House and that was where you wanted to be if you were a student who is focused on high academic achievement. And I might have been one of three African-American students in that dorm. There might have been maybe 300 students in the Honors College who live in the dorm. And that became a very isolating experience. I mean, it was isolating by definition. You're living up on a big hill and you're looking down at everyone else and the metaphor there kind of sticks once they find out you're an honors student, people kind of back away from you and say, "Oh, you're one of those smart people," so that isolated me from the African-American community at Clemson. It isolated me from the majority community, the white students. There was a lot of isolation there, a lot of isolation even in the Engineering community. And you have to learn how to process all of that at a young age where you kind of don't understand a lot of it and still achieve.

So college made me grow in a lot of ways. It made me withdraw in a lot of ways. And a lot of what I saw kind of harkened back to themes that I learned when I was young. Are people really smarter than other people? Or do people differ in levels of experience? And if you can bolster of levels of experience, can you make people smarter? And the answer to all of that to me now is yes, but I got to figure things like that out at Clemson along with Thevenin's equivalent circuits and Kirchhoff's Law and all the other stuff that we did in engineering that I still remember, but it's not as important as what I just mentioned about bolstering levels of experience, because that's carried me into what I do now.

McIlwain: And did you have a role there in obviously getting your, you know, education where it needed to be but helping other students through kind of those challenges around you know, the imposter

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syndrome or just getting a handle on the work in particular classes? What was your role and vis-à-vis your classmates?

Brown: It's funny, in college, students view and judge other students based on GPA and little else. So if you look at my GPA, I'm what you would call a 3.5. You know, you measure me on the GPA Richter scale, I'm a 3.5 on the Richter scale. I'm not a 4.0. I'm not a 3.0. I'm somewhere in between. Now if you ask me who I am and what my strengths are, my strengths are I'm not afraid of what I don't know and my other strength is I am able to articulate what I don't know and identify and research the resolution of my ignorance. So that made me an effective tutor to a lot of people and that became noticed by a lot of people. So I was hired as a tutor in our… we had an engineering enrichment and retention program. It was called PEER, Program for Engineering Enrichment and Retention. It was started my freshman year in 1987 and I became a tutor for the program in 1990. 1990 would have been my third year at Clemson. That's when I'm getting into my major classes, the very difficult classes. So being in the tutor role gave me the chance to help a lot of students, but and I will say in all candor-- and I won't stop the tape for this one there-- it also made me a hindrance to a lot of students. And I don't want to over-explain that, but there were a lot of students that I knew kind of depended on me and depended on me way too much. And you may even remember this story, Charlton. I told you Dr. Snelsire, one of my favorite professors, gave me a key to his office so I could study. And I'm not sure whether I told the story to you this way, but he gave me that key so I could hide. So that when I had to do my work, nobody would be able to find me and ask me to do their work. Because a lot of that went on and it took me some years to kind of open my mouth and talk about it. I certainly wasn't talking about it much in 2015, but you made me think about it a lot to the point where I said, "Yeah, somebody might be helped by me saying, 'Yeah, I was in a strange position there because I helped a lot of people and I think I hindered a lot of people. And I've got to figure out how to not be such a hindrance while appearing to be a help, if that makes sense.'"

McIlwain: Yeah. And it sounds like Dr. Snelsire helped you kind of navigate that difficulty by giving you the key to the office knowing what it took to get through that and to succeed and you know, in some ways look out for everybody else, but make sure you're looking out for yourself first and foremost and get on the path where you needed to be.

Brown: Yeah. And the other big thing about being in his office was I had access to his library. And he's an electrical engineering professor, so he's got all the books that I would have to go and dig through our library to find. He's got them all right here on this shelf alphabetized by disciplines and sub-disciplines and I've got access to them. And I share that access with my fellow students once I emerge from this cave and I've come back with the tablets bearing all of the knowledge that we all need and for those who want to partake of it in the legitimate way, I'd say, "Hey, man. This is hard to do without appropriate partnerships, where you and I are collectively tackling and resolving our ignorance. I don't want to study with folks that are just kind of sitting back and saying, "Hey, what you come up with?" because we had a lot of that. We had a lot of that.

McIlwain: So you, what year did then you graduate from for Clemson?

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Brown: Graduated in December 1991, so that means I got to enjoy an additional football season. I got five football seasons because it took me 4-1/2 years to graduate and that was all planned. Even though our team didn't do as well as we would have liked for them to do back in those years, I did get to enjoy that fifth season and I got to enjoy a last semester where I took-- I think I took a class in nonverbal communication, and I took a class in philosophy. I relaxed that last semester to get ready for what would come next and start that process of kind of rounding myself into form, because I have not engaged much in writing at all at Clemson. I've been all engineering, all math, science, technology, and I'm now a hard-core techie but now at my core, I'm still a writer, I'm just not stirring up that gift and nurturing it the way I should have been.

McIlwain: Gotcha. So, you're wrapping up. You're about to graduate. What did you-- What was on the horizon for you? What was you-- What did you imagine was coming next in terms of work or school? What were you looking to get into?

Brown: Well, one of the many great things about the Program for Engineering Enrichment and Retention is you are mentored and guided by some people who have been there to always be looking at what you're going to do next. So, I think my senior year I got a graduate fellowship[3] that would allow me to intern with a company who would be my sponsor and then return to that company for each summer that I would be in grad school. And that got picked up by a company called the Mitre Corporation. And I'm a wordsmith, so I look up “mitre” and to “mitre” means “to fit together”. They're a systems engineering firm, so I said, "Look at this.” I have ended up working for a systems engineering firm. Even though my school doesn't have this major, I'll get to see what systems engineering looks like as opposed to the electrical engineering that I had practiced, because there's lots of electrical engineers there. There are lots of bio engineering folks there. There are lots of coders there. And they're all working on all these different government projects. There are defense contractors and they do federally funded research and development. Now I get to see what all of that looks like. And I did and it helped me understand what I wanted to do and what I didn't want to do, which gave me a great focus in grad school. And it was such a powerful focus, I would tell anybody, yeah, that of all the fellowships you can get, this one was called the GEM Fellowship and I think GEM stands for Graduate degrees for Minorities in Engineering, something like that. They're still around, but that is a powerful experience to be able to put into practice the things that you are studying while you are still in school, because that informs class choices and professors that you might want to interact with, either directly with them as your instructor. You might want to do a project for them. It just gave me a lot of guidance and a lot of savvy that paid off for me.

Weber: Before moving on too much before, I did want to ask, so in Charlton's book, he talked about I think at Clemson you were already using email, you were online and there was you were DJing and people could only find the way to the party with through email or something like-- Talk about your online

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[3] [from Derrick Brown] The GEM Fellowship Program offers minority students the opportunity to obtain a master’s degree within industry. GEM Fellows are provided practical engineering summer work experiences through an employer sponsor and a portable academic year fellowship of tuition, fees, and a stipend which may be used at any participating GEM member university where the GEM Fellow is admitted.

experience and also I couldn't quite understand that. So you're still up on the hill at Clemson, but you were also DJing and kind of the center of that scene.

Brown: Yeah. The DJing happened at Georgia Tech. That wasn't--

Weber: Ah, so I'm mixing it up. Okay.

Brown: Yeah. That wasn't until I got to Georgia Tech. At Clemson, I was all about those books. All about the books. And then when I made the choice for grad school, I actually made a social choice for grad school. I realized that the isolation I experienced at Clemson I could kind of undo if I chose a grad school that would at least let me be around a lot of people who looked like me, who was also trying to do what I was trying to do and that made Georgia Tech the logical choice for grad school; the same way it wasn't the right choice as my undergraduate school, it was the absolute right choice for grad school because when I went on Grad School Recruitment Weekend, I saw a lot of African-American students from all over the country who all said, "Why wouldn't you go to grad school in Atlanta? Why wouldn't you?" So we all did.

McIlwain: And now--

Brown: Go ahead.

McIlwain: Go ahead.

Weber: But you were on-- Did you go online at Georgia Tech, though?

Brown: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. I went online at Georgia Tech. This would have happened--

Weber: No, I'll let you go in order, but--

Brown: Yeah. It started in 1993. I saw all of the tools available at Clemson and I used them sparingly. I saw them as requiring time I didn't really have. I spent most of my time in the Macintosh computer lab working on spreadsheets for lab reports and stuff like that. And I would see everybody on the Digital [DEC] machines and the Sun computers and would wonder what they were doing and would say, "Okay, I'll save that for grad school." So when I got to grad school, I made a lot of friends just by going to the computer lab and sitting next to people who looked like they were doing neat stuff, so that's how I learned about Lynx, which was a text-based web browser from way back when, and how to access sites like Yahoo using the Lynx text-based browser and still being able to extract a lot of useful information from it.

And then in 1994, this was early in 1994, I went and sat by a brother by the name of Jerry Volcy. And I remember Jerry, because Jerry's brother, Frantz Volcy played basketball for Seton Hall and I remembered seeing Frantz Volcy on TV when Seton Hall went on a nice run in the NCAA Basketball Tournament, March Madness. But Jerry was on the internet in something that operated like Lynx but it had graphics and color and it just looked like a very different user experience. So I asked him what that

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was and he said, "Well, this is called Netscape. This is an internet browser like Lynx but it's like Lynx to the 50th power." I said, "Okay. I think I get what you're saying there. This is a very useful tool. It's a graphical interface to the internet. Man, that's going to make it a lot easier to get to all of this information." So I said, "So how can I get this at home?" And he said, "Well, there are a lot of people who know how to do it; there are a lot of people who don't know how to do it. I am one of the people who don't know how to do it." This is-- This is what Jerry's saying. "This is why I come to the computer lab to use it. But somebody around here knows how to use it." So that put me on a quest to find these people, and I found them and asked them, "Hey, how do you set this up?" So they showed me how to set it up and it's kind of technical. A little involved. So I asked them, like the systems engineer that I don't know that I am, but I really am, I say, "How can you streamline these scripts? How can you turn it into something that's almost like an installation disk that I could pop into the computer on a floppy, make several copies, double click a file, and just have all of it happen?" And they said, "Well, we don't know. That's something you can help us do." So we got together and did that as a project that became a fundraiser for the organization I was involved in at Georgia Tech, the Black Graduate Student Association. We put together a floppy diskette that would install all of the scripts that you needed to access the internet and use Netscape from home on your 14.4 kilobaud modem. And that, I set sail after that. It's like, this is-- This is significant. This is-- This has been invented in my lifetime. This is, like, I don't know who was around when Henry Ford invented his car. Well, this was like watching the car be invented or watching a hammer be invented. This is big stuff.

McIlwain: And so--

Weber: Charlton, I broke the chronology. Sorry.

McIlwain: Yeah. No problem. We're there, we're there. I'm going to back up just a little bit. But kind of stay where you were. You're like at a point, you're at Georgia Tech. You're getting a Master's in what at Georgia Tech?

Brown: Electrical Engineering.

McIlwain: Also, Electrical Engineering. Okay. And so you're there and you've just talked about kind of being at that nexus where you could see what's happening, you can see a little bit of the future. You have an opportunity to help other people understand and plug into that. What was the… You brought up the Black Graduate Student Association. Let's talk about a little bit about that. How did you end up as part of that group? What was that group in terms of who was there, who were its members and what significance did that have in terms of you helping to kind of shape where you wanted to kind of plug in in terms of some of these new tools that were on the horizon?

Brown: All right, all right. We had a community of over 300 African-American grad students at Georgia Tech. And that was a situation that I don't think existed anywhere else in the country, that large a mass of students of color. And the organization that brought us all together, the Black Grad Students Association, I got involved in that when I first got to Georgia Tech. And the experience of putting that little disk together to get you on to the internet prompted me to create the Information Resources and Technology Committee. We had this fancy long name and we just shortened it to Infocomm and I sold it at a meeting

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as, "Hey, if you know how to do anything with this internet or anything around accessing information, this is the place to be." So I had a committee. Charlton, I sent the list to you of the folks who were on that first committee, and I didn't realize who I had on that committee. I had some heavy hitting techies, a lot of software engineers, a lot of information architects, a lot of database designers. I attracted all of the folks that had the Computer Science background and deep skill set that I didn't have.

But as the generalist in the group, I knew how to bring all of it together, make it fit together and make it work and we got some good stuff done. Most of it was in the name of training, getting people on to the internet, helping them learn how to use Unix. As convoluted and as complicated as Unix is as an operating system, it is equally powerful when it comes to managing and manipulating information. So, there's some stuff you have to learn about Unix. So, I would teach the Unix classes as someone who understood enough about it to get you introduced to it and then I could introduce you to the heavy hitters who can take you deeper if you have to go deeper and a lot of the examples that I would use in my classes would be problems that I actually solved either in my research or management tasks for the Grad Student Association. We used to maintain a large email directory of all the students of color at Tech and this is how we would let them know what was going on. When I was having a party and we were frying fish and I would deejay the party, I could type that up in an email, send it to those 300 people and 50 or 60 of them were going to come to our large three-bedroom apartment out on Buford Highway and we're going to have a great time and that was all facilitated by email. Imagine if I'm printing invitations and licking stamps as a graduate student. That's not going to happen, but I'm using Elm… that was the mail reader they were using, I'm using Elm to send one message to a list of 300 people that I have carefully built using Unix commands like grep and awk to make this nice clean list where I send to everybody and I might get two or three messages that bounce back, but that's not like a $0.20 stamp wasted. I don't waste anything but bandwidth in these bounce backs, but people get the word. People respond and let you know that they're coming. Now I know how much fish to buy. Now I know which songs to play. I can send out an email and say "Here's the playlist. Add your favorite song." Now, everybody's going to have a great time because I'm going to play their favorite song. I might play it when they walk in and all of that is being driven by these technologies and our ability to harness and use them.

McIlwain, Charlton: I would imagine people start to see the utility in all of those things in this kind of social environment, the ability to know where the party is, know what kind of party you're going to get all through this new tool. So, was this a way not only kind of to help facilitate the party, but really to get them thinking about what these new tools could be like if they adopted and used and pushed for them.

Brown, Derrick: No doubt. I am subtly doing marketing and community outreach to people who have the ability to introduce and usher other people into the use of these technologies and these people who have these abilities are almost as afraid as the people that I eventually want them to help. So, I've got to help them get over that fear first so that they can then go and help somebody else because this is new and this is hot and I get it-- as a student of history, you don't take advantage of this… somebody's going to become the gatekeeper for all of this stuff if you don't run in and grab the gold before they section off those hills. You've got to go in there and grab that gold.

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McIlwain, Charlton: So, you're serving as the facilitator, the organizer, the coordinator for all these folks who have differential expertise. How did that then channel into early on what became the kind of concept that ultimately birthed the Universal Black Pages?

Brown, Derrick: All right. I realized the power that I had on that committee and then I realized the agency that I had being the head of the committee. That ushered me into becoming the President. Somewhere between the fish fries and the playlists and all the email, I was well-known. As shy as I was, I was well-known because of what I did. So, when I became the President, in my inaugural address, I said "We're about to become a wired and crunk organization. This is what we're going to do," and those two words were powerful in the mid-90s. Wired is inviting you to something that a lot of people are scared of, but crunk, that's where everybody wants to be. That's hip and cool. So, wired and crunk-- those two words were very intentional in using them together. We're going to be both. You'll never get a paper invitation to anything I'm having in my house. It's always going to be email and I'm going to email you the directions … even though you still have to print them out. You don't have GPSs on your phone and stuff like that. You will have to print them out and read them, but I'm going to tell you how to print them out using campus resources, where you can just go by and pick up the printout at the Office of Information Technology if you don't have your own printer. We're full service in getting people to buy in to what this stuff is because as technologists, we've got to know how to use and leverage this not just in support of our engineering and computer science disciplines, but in the name of building community outside of the hallowed halls of Georgia Tech. Georgia Tech is legendary for being in Atlanta but not necessarily being of Atlanta. It's kind of disconnected from the city of Atlanta, but this is the way we can bridge those gaps even between all the other schools in Atlanta and that's what we set out to do.

McIlwain, Charlton: So, you've got then this committee. It's got some different folks on it, different personalities, etc. How then did the kernel of trying to connect not only what was happening within Georgia Tech and the BGSA-- when did that vision start to turn outward and the idea of being able to connect people beyond Georgia Tech, even beyond Georgia, across this new thing that was called the internet?

Brown, Derrick: I think everybody knew that my interest was like grassroots community building type stuff using the tools and some of the other guys on the committee were programmers and focused on building content. So, they would tell me their ideas in their committee reports and one day, it comes across my desk that they're putting together this list of African-related internet resources and I used my imagination and I said "Ah, like Yahoo, this is a niched Yahoo." "Yeah, it's a niched Yahoo." "Okay. All right. It's a directory. Am I able to search?" and they said "Well, yeah, you're able to search. Here's how you write a search engine." So, they showed me a search engine written in a scripting language called Perl and I can't code, but I can read code. So, I read it and I say "Wow, this is-- I won't say it's simple because I can't write it, but it's easy to understand, easy to digest. Can you aggregate all the searches that people do over a period of time and then maybe analyze them in a database format?" "Yeah, you can do stuff like that." "Okay, we should do that." "Yeah, that's a good idea." "I know. That's why I'm the systems guy, man."

I'm like figuring out ways to leverage this stuff, to simplify it, and to kind of make it universal and make it applicable and useful to lots of folks. So, that's how we figured out we have a search engine just like…

I'm trying to remember the other search engines of that time… Infoseek, AltaVista, and I guess Yahoo, technically, was a search engine. So, we were like "We can build the same type of thing that they're building," and then I asked one of them one day, I said "Doesn't it seem like this stuff is way more complicated… doesn't it seem like a search engine should be like a million lines of code?" and they say "No, it's not, though." I say "No, I'm not saying whether it is or not." I'm saying, "Doesn't it seem like this is something really hard to do?" So, then they catch my drift. They say "Yeah, that seems like it's something really hard to do." I say "Well, then these are probably the types of ideas and technologies that you commercialize. You can commercialize this, man, because your search engine wouldn't be exactly like Yahoo's because you wrote yours and they wrote theirs. You can make yours faster. You can distinguish yours from theirs in many ways. You've already distinguished that you're trying to capture African-related content, which I gravitate towards naturally because now, you're going and trying to build the type of community we're trying to build through fish fries here on the ground, you're trying to build these same types of communities online. Man, that's awesome. That is awesome. That is awesome." So, I say "Go, keep going and do as much with this as you can. We don't have a lot of money, but the money we do have-- I'm the President. I'll put money behind whatever it is that you're doing and if I can't put the money behind it, I'll go and find the money."

So, as they come up with ideas, I champion and market the ideas. There's a group of professors of color at Georgia Tech who were all very important heavy-hitting kinds of folks in their own right. They cosigned and underwrote a lot of what was going on and I would be having the meetings with them to tell them what we were doing and the kinds of support that we needed. In 1994, I don't know that a professor is as powerful as I know professors are now. Maybe all I saw a professor as was the person who keeps writing these really hard tests that I cannot complete in a reasonable amount of time. They've got a lot more going on than that. They've got a keen eye towards commercializing research and that's going to make them very helpful to us outside of our classroom experiences. So, we've got to get to know these folks and we've got to leverage them. We've got to get them to get behind what we're doing. So, just the vision of seeing all of that possible in this environment that I'm in, I don't know that anybody else is seeing it or not, but I know that I saw it. Okay. We've got to push this forward. That's how we got momentum, and that momentum eventually became the Universal Black Pages, a directory of African-related internet content.

Weber, Marc: So, you were talking about the beginnings of the Universal Black Pages and then some of the people you're working with, we already covered the idea and then I think we hadn't talked yet about the commercial venture, [the] vision for turning it into a commercial venture, the seed funding, etc. Does that sound right to you as the starting point?

Brown, Derrick: Yeah, that would be good.

Weber, Marc: Okay. Go ahead.

Brown, Derrick: So, the primary developer behind the Universal Black Pages was Alou Macalou and during the Christmas holidays, 1994-- this was like December 1994, I wrote the first draft [of] a business plan for my idea, which was called KnowledgeBase, which would focus on community building and outreach through these technologies, and Alou contacted me and told me about the Universal Black Pages. He had come up with a name and a concept to make it a search engine and a directory where all

the reviews of sites would be written by real people, people like me and him. We would write reviews of the sites, visit them, be very familiar with them and he was beginning to think about how to build a business around the whole idea and he mentioned that he didn't have experience with writing a business plan and writing a business plan is not something you have to be smart to do. It's just something you have to have the experience to do. So, I told him "I don't have a lot of experience, but I have finished a draft of this plan for KnowledgeBase." So, that's kind of how we came together in addition to already being part of this committee. He was the Chair of the committee the year after I was the Chair. The first year I'm the President now and he's Chair of the committee. So, we get together and decide we're going to join forces in a strategic alliance, really, of this KnowledgeBase concept, this Universal Black Pages concept. We'll build a company around it. We'll build a business plan and I volunteered to be the author of the plan. So, it took a few months to put all that together. Once we pulled it together through dialogue, most of which happened via email, we produced a draft of the plan, we put some financials together, and then we started to shop for support in the local college community. We connected with a professor at Morehouse [College], whose name was Dr. Vince Carter, who had a keen marketing interest in information technology. So, he became a very good advisor. Dr. Gary May, who is now the Chancellor of—I've got to say the name right. I may have to come back and clean this up. He's at one of the California State Universities. He's the Chancellor of one of the California State Universities[4]. He was a young professor at Tech who agreed to be one of our advisors. So, we start pulling key people into key places to help us figure out what we have and then we start to connect to the entrepreneurship community at Georgia Tech.

Tech has a business incubator called the Advanced Technology Development Center, the ATDC. They are kind of the Silicon Valley of Atlanta. We pitched to ATDC to try to have our fledgling company become one of the companies in the incubator and we weren't successful in joining the incubator, but they did give us a fair level of access to the consultants on staff and in particular, I got to spend a lot of time with the Director of ATDC. His name was Dwight Holter. He was an attorney who was the Head of ATDC and in one of the conversations I had with him, he broke this concept down to me in a simply elegant way. He said when you're building a company, it's like you're building a stool and the stool's got four legs.

The first leg is the management leg, who's running the ship, so to speak, who has what role and what responsibility, and there's another leg called marketing, how are you communicating about what you're doing to your key strategic partners, your investors, all the people who need to know this story and this concept, how are you relating this concept to them. Then you've got another leg that you call technology. You have developed something that gives you some strategic advantage over others. This tool will facilitate whatever it is that you're trying to do and then the fourth leg was finance and he said it to me just like this-- he said "If the first three legs are there, then that fourth leg will come," and I kind of heard him twice the first time he said that and that became one of the more powerful mentoring experiences I've ever had. We were standing in front of his office when he told me all this and maybe two days after he told me all of this, he retired from ATDC and left, and I never saw him again.

That was the only conversation I was able to have with him. But the other thing that he told me on that day is he told me point blank period, he said "I don't think you guys are going to be able to make this

[4] Dr. Gary S. May is the Chancellor of the University of California-Davis.

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work." Now, he didn't go into all of the whys, but what he said to me was he said, "It's clear to me what your role is in this, but I'm not sure that your role is clear to all of your partners and I'm not sure your partners roles were clear to all the people we presented to." So, he says "Do you notice that we directed all the questions to you?" So, I tell him "Yeah, I notice that." He said "Well, we view you as the key man, but I don't know if your partners see you as the key man." Now, this is a man with a lot of experience. I could tell he had a lot of experience and a lot of knowledge, and I can tell you now, he was absolutely right in what he saw. I didn't see it until he said it to me, but I would come to quickly understand the problem we were going to have is respecting everybody's role in the situation.

When you're building a company around a technology, it is very easy-- and I do it-- it's very easy for the technologists to view their role as being more important than the person who makes the presentation or the person who builds the strategies, the person who leads the marketing. It's easy to not value each of those roles and that was a problem that never went away, and I would say in summary, that was what kind of grounded us before we were able to really fly. Now, before we hit those divides, we were able to make some headway with raising investment. We raised … I can tell you we raised about $20,000, which wasn't a lot. It was a lot to us because we raised it from a lot of the Georgia Tech alumni that we had attended grad school with who were now employed. It was natural for us to first go to friends, family, and associates. Those were our friends, family, and associates. So, we were able to raise enough money to get off the ground. Nobody's taking a salary, but that's enough money for us to find somewhere to host our site, pay for the software we need, the computers we need, get everything up and going, and spend a small amount on marketing what we were doing. So, we kind of burned through that money fairly quickly and once we started getting low on funds, that's when a lot of the cracks in the armor started to show in our relationships and I would tell anybody now when you are partnering to build a company, that's a marriage-level partnership and you've got to have a level of intimacy insofar as respect is concerned that will rival what I have with my wife, Keisha. You've got to be that close to the people you're working with because you're going to go through some twists and turns and some topsy turvy experiences that will either make you stronger or it will pull you completely apart and I can say in all candor now it pulled us apart. It pulled us apart very quickly.

So, as we went our separate ways, there was still this technology. There was still this effort that we had undertaken and we had begun to attract advertising revenue. Our largest advertiser was Microsoft. I wrote our advertising strategy, but Microsoft kind of fell into our laps because they saw what we had and they saw a use for it to support their diversity recruiting. So, they became our front page advertiser and then we figured out that we could use animated GIFs to create rotating advertisements that might have appeared to be gaudy to some of our audience, but it was a way to maximize advertising revenue in the limited space we had on each page for ads and a lot of us wrestled with the notion of selling advertising and I was chief among them-- I did not want to clutter our pages with advertising, but if you're not charging for connecting to the site, you're not charging membership fees, you've got to monetize in some way. We went the advertising route. We now are validated that that's a legitimate revenue model and we did some good things. We certainly did some good things, but our situation kind of fell apart before it had a chance to come together and gel.

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Weber, Marc: And the chronology-- so, ’94 is when you started this and you got the $20,000 in seed funding that year and then the advertising, you described-- I think it was in your business plan or what’s in Charlton’s book-- the sort of rotating-- you would have like slots where the ads would rotate, right?

Brown, Derrick: Yes.

Weber, Marc: When did that come about?

Brown, Derrick: We had advertisers probably by the middle of 1996, I’m going to call it. I’m calling that off the top of my head. It was around 1996 where we were making some money now and we were able to use our traffic to identify the sweet spots for advertising, which would inform the pitches that I could make. I would market our advertising opportunity a lot to fraternities and sororities because we had a fraternities and sororities page for different fraternity and sorority chapters at schools across the country and a lot of them took us up on advertising opportunities because a lot of small businesses grow out of fraternities and sororities and making the paraphernalia that they use in step shows and clothing paraphernalia. We were able to sell a lot of ads to folks like that. We had a lot of art dealers who wanted to advertise their wares locally in Atlanta. We had some momentum in that area. We had some pretty good momentum that we could have gotten a little bit more out of, I think.

Weber, Marc: So, was that bringing in enough to pay yourselves salaries?

Brown, Derrick: We never reached a point where we were paying ourselves, never got to that point.

Weber, Marc: It was a corporation then?

Brown, Derrick: Yeah. It was a corporation, and I was the vice president of strategic planning, something like that, and Alou Macalou was the CEO, and we had a CTO by the name of Lawrence Ward. Those were the three primary officers and since I was there as part of a strategic alliance with KnowledgeBase, our understanding was I wasn’t going to take any stock in the company and I would kind of put it together, make it fit, define roles, help market it, and then work alongside them as the head of KnowledgeBase. So, I entered with the exit strategy of my ultimate vision is to be a grassroots organizer where the internet is concerned, and the Universal Black Pages was going to be a strategic partner to me in making that vision happen. No one ever got any salary, and we never resolved the owner-- the stock ownership situation. We just dissolved it and kind of left it like it was and we all went our separate ways and that all happened probably mid-1997. We were all wrapped up and ”finito” at that point. We were able to recoup most of our investors’ money. I was happy about that because these were friends of mine. I raised almost all of that money. I think I raised all of that money. So, it was a pressure point for me to not go belly up and waste my friends’ money like that. So, I was able to get them their money back.

Weber, Marc: Going back to when you were starting it, you were hosting it, what, just a commercial co-lo [co-location server center] or something?

Brown, Derrick: Yeah. I think we used Netgate. That was our host. I don't know if they’re still around.

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Weber, Marc: KnowledgeBase-- so, two questions-- tell a little bit about what the goals were. I think that I also read in Charlton's book. A lot of it was about consulting, as I understood it, and then also why were you not interested in sort of going full-bore as a startup with Universal Black Pages?

Brown, Derrick: Well, I am-- at that point, I'm 26, 27 years old and had begun to understand who I was-- who I was by nature, who I was by interest, who I am by commitment, and a lot of what I experienced in the startup world was not for me. These are not the conversations I like having. These are not the alliances I like to create. I'm probably much more an organizer and a lover of people and that is not what that experience ever presented itself as and I don't think it ever became that for me. But in KnowledgeBase, my focus there was the creation of content. We learned early on in constructing our directory that content was king on the internet. We were trying to aggregate content. I wanted to be a creator of that content and I wanted to create content that educated and empowered. I didn't want to be a school, per se, but I wanted to be someone who created tools of learning and I say learning in a certain way because I spell learning with a capital L and a capital E because I want to produce the kind of learning that facilitates earning and not just learning money, but earning social capital and respect by producing solutions to the problems of our existing state and one of those problems we have in our state is reading, writing, and counting, leading and creating and thinking. So, anything I can create, whether it's a poem, whether it's a song, whether it's a graphical meme, I'm creating content that educates and empowers and I see that vision and I'm able to create that through my ability to write and speak and create, using the computer.

So, I knew I had momentum in that area. I didn't know what my market was going to be, but I knew my momentum. And that momentum was carrying me away from the world of startups into a world where I could help people who helped people. So, my community and my fellowship ended up being with a lot of the nonprofit organizations here in Atlanta, back in the mid-90s. That was who I was able to help, and I was able to help them because I saw them helping other people. So, one of our earliest programs was called Project CHIP, which stands for Computer Hardware Investigation and Procurement, but CHIP kind of plays on the Silicon Valley theme, there.

We identified sources of used computers, and redistributed them from folks who no longer wanted them to folks who needed them, and we rinsed and repeated. And we did that for many years. And I think we placed probably around 1500 computers in homes and organizations, and we identified a lot of those computers from places like Georgia Tech. Georgia Tech, as an institution, probably turns over their personal computing allotment maybe every other year. They get new stuff and they surplus the old stuff. And there are rules in place that say where the surplus stuff went. So, I was able to understand the rules and gain control of a lot of that equipment, where I would not necessarily redistribute it to somebody, but I would build a community technology center, say, in Rome, Georgia, with Georgia Tech's blessing, and allow Rome, Georgia, access to that older equipment. Then, once they were done with it, we put it right back into Georgia Tech's hands, and then they surplus and dispose of it, as they will according to their capital assets rules. And once you get into that situation, you sit down and you talk to people and you understand what you can do and what you can't do, then you go ahead and do what you can do in ways that help people. And I found a lot of fulfillment in that, and that made it the place I wanted to be and where I needed to be.

Weber: In the BGSA, there were several women involved as well, right?

Brown: Yes, oh, yes. I would say our graduate community was 50/50, male and female. And I know that the people I studied with tended to be female students who were very organized and very algorithmic in their thinking. A lot of the folks I studied with were software engineers. And they were very good and problem-solving, especially in your esoteric subjects, like random and stochastic processes and probability. I would always study with the software engineers because they were great at enumerating and visualizing enumeration in their head. That's something that I'm not that good at, but they were really good at situations just like that. It made them great study partners.

Weber: And you said there were several hundred Black graduate students total at Georgia Tech, is that right?

Brown: Yes, around 300.

Weber: And within that, women were, you say, close to--

Brown: Probably half. About half.

Weber: Because yeah, I mean, the BGSA was, what? Half men, half women, something like that?

Brown: Yeah, yeah, I think so.

Weber: So, you know, talk a little bit about-- I mean, obviously, that's what led you there, and that was a community where there was support, and, you know, the people that looked like you there. But I mean, do you think-- I know that completion can be an issue. Did most people graduate that went in?

Brown: Yeah. See, the attraction of Tech was, one, it's in Atlanta, and two, you can complete a master's in four quarters. Most of us had the fellowship that I mentioned, the GEM Fellowship. You can finish your master's degree in four quarters. Now, a lot of students then stayed on for the PhD program, and now the PhD path was not quite as deterministic. But we still saw large numbers of African-American students complete PhD studies at Tech. It was a tougher mountain to climb, but the BGSA played a large role in providing the emotional support, and even the strategic support of connecting students with students who had already obtained their PhDs and were in industry, and bringing them back to campus as speakers and just letting people see what they wanted to be. It was a simple concept, but you're able to execute that simple concept because of the connection that exists between the people who graduate and the people who are still there. And maintaining that pipeline and regular ways of fellowship and interaction, I know, helped to produce a lot of success stories. Even folks who might have taken a while to finish were able to finish. And everybody who finishes inspires everybody else who is still trying to traverse that path, because it's a difficult path.

Weber: And the BGSA, that was part of the activity as well, formally? Or not?

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Brown: Yeah, formally, yes, sir. I attended every graduation that I knew about, while I was president. Like I was an official attendee at every BGSA member's graduation, whether that's master's or PhD. And I'm hoping that's a tradition that continues some 25 years after I was there, because that show of support is a powerful one, and it's a needed one.

Weber: You were involved in peer counseling in some form at Clemson. Was there some equivalent, also, at--

Brown: Yeah, at Georgia Tech, they have OMED, Office of Minority Educational Development. Now, I did work as a tutor for a little while at OMED, during my first year at Tech, maybe, but I did not have the time, did not have the same amount of time and same class schedule that I had at Clemson. So, as organizations, BGSA and OMED collaborate a lot. One way OMED always supported what we did is that's where we got our student data from, every semester, to produce the email list that allowed us to all stay in touch. That information always came directly from OMED.

Weber: And what Georgia Tech was-- I mean, there were African-Americans, white students, were there many other people of color? Or was it pretty much--

Brown: It had a growing Latino population in the '90s that has continued to grow. Now there are-- I think there's a triumvirate of organizations. There's the Black Grad Student Association, there's the Society of Hispanic and Professional Engineers, there's the Society of Black Engineers, there's the Society of Women Engineers. There are affinity groups for every minority at Tech, and I think those groups are still going pretty strong. They're very important, very important roles.

Weber: And so the Universal Black Pages fed, obviously, with them-- I mean, you can-- as you said, it's a way for companies to recruit to do their diversity programs, to do recruiting. What was your vision for, you know, making the Universal Black Pages both commercially viable and also a public good for Black communities?

Brown: Serving as a point of connection. A lot of what I enjoyed about working directly in management of the Universal Black Pages is I would respond … any time somebody submitted a site for inclusion in the directory, I would begin the process of communicating with them. And I enjoyed that very much, because we would have famous singers who were parts of gospel groups like The Sounds of Blackness. I remember, the lead singer of The Sounds of Blackness became a solo artist, and she wrote us and said, hey, I have a website promoting my first song, and I'm really nervous about stepping out here on my own and stepping away from my group. So I don't know if she had submitted her site to many other directories, but I wrote her back, like ours was the only one that she had reached out to, and I had a real conversation with her. She actually wrote me back, and we were able to dialogue via email, where I told her I knew all the words to all The Sounds of Blackness's songs. And it was exciting to just hear that she had stepped out on her own, and we'd do everything we could to let people know about what she had. That was a conversation that stuck out to me, and it's one of many that I had with a lot of people who became prominent. We were having people come to us because they saw us as a gateway to connecting to folks

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who might traditionally be disconnected, especially with something new and emerging, like the internet. They saw us as a way to connect the disconnected. And that was fulfilling, to be thought of that way.

Weber: Yahoo had people that were going out and finding new sites and links, and some of them were specialized. Within your group, did some of you handle more art and some handle sport, or was it more-- you know, who-- just take me through the process of how you would find out what was there and add new links.

Brown: All right. So most people found us.

Weber: Okay.

Brown: And a lot of people came to us to search for what else might be out there. And when we learned how to aggregate those search terms and report on them, I kind of operated as the de facto editor-in-chief, if you will. So, we learned how to write what they called web crawlers, code that will go out and look for certain types of sites. And then, I would mimic the web crawling activity manually, kind of as boots on the ground. I would go out and look for sites, based on what people had been searching for. And we got very organized and efficient in doing that as a way of identifying sites that people weren't submitting. So we had it covered both ways, I think. Now, it took a lot of manpower, but we had folks who could find us, and then we had folks who couldn't find what they were looking for, but then I could go out and find what they were looking for.

Weber: And so you were using what? Lycos or Infoseek or Yahoo?

Brown: I was a big Infoseek fan. I thought that was… they always helped me find what I was looking for, and at the time I didn't realize that all search engines kind of used the same command syntaxes. But I learned the command syntax of Infoseek, to do powerful, advanced searches, that… I'm sure you could do it on any of them now, but Infoseek was the one I learned on, so that was the one I always used.

Weber: Yeah, or once you knew it, there was no point in-- okay. And so tell me the number of links or sites you had, how did that grow over time? I mean, you started-- when you first-- I mean, when did you first make the site public, and how-- and what were you starting with? How many sites or topics?

Brown: Yeah, late '94-- I'm going to ballpark this now. We might have had 300 sites, late '94. By early 1998, we might have had around 4,000. Now, these are sites that we've identified, vetted, and had a human write a review for, that will let people know what they're about to go and visit when they click.

Weber: So the high-water mark was…

Brown: Probably about 4,000.

Weber: Okay.

Brown: Yeah, and now, at our end, we might have had 3,000 sites in our submission queue that we just hadn't had time to review. So what was significant about that to us is we didn't know whether or not the diaspora's presence on the internet was strong. But through the sites that we were able to review and the sites that were submitted, we could see, hey, yeah, this world is representing people of color. This new world we call the internet, we are well-represented. But now, what we have to do is find ways to archive and preserve, because there were lots of sites-- I looked at, just the other day, in preparation for the interview, the last edition of the directory we published, we had begun to gray-out the sites that were no longer there, but we wanted to at least make mention of them. We didn't want the user to click and see that 404 error. We would just gray the site out and say, hey, this site is no longer here, but this is what it was. This is what Cafe Los Negros was. It was a great hangout for people who loved music. And just make sure people knew that they were there. Kind of the way archive.org does. We were doing that back in the mid-90s, and I appreciated that when I found out about archive.org, that they would kind of freeze a site in their time machine, so that people would know it was there.

Weber: Yeah, that's interesting, that showed-- also showed, visually, how quickly things were changing.

Brown: Yeah, it changed a lot.

Weber: So, Charlton, we're talking about sort of the growth and the peak of the Universal Black Pages. And, I mean, the number of users, I'm sure you tracked, that was probably through some of the stuff from Jim Pitkow, right? But do you know-- what was the curve of that?

Brown: I remember, from advertising literature, we might have gotten as high as 30,000 visitors in a month. Now, these aren't record-setting numbers now, but to us, that represented an exponential growth from where we started in 1994. We knew we had eyeballs coming to that site, and we knew where the sticky places were. We knew where they would come to visit and where they would stay and where they would gravitate the most.

Weber: Which were those? Where did they--

Brown: The fraternities and sororities page, by far. By far. We wouldn't have predicted that, but you don't have to predict when you've got stats. The stats tell you; this is what people come here for.

Weber: And could-- but there was no-- you guys are writing the review. It's not that someone could comment. That came much later.

Brown: Yeah, we ended up taking some volunteer reviewers, because we couldn't get to all that stuff ourselves. And it would be people who would comment via email, that I would reach out to and say, “You are pretty good at this, would you like to help us write these reviews? Oh, we've got plenty.” And I can only describe a site with so many words for so long. We've got to have a diversity of thought there, to have robust writing that people will read and enjoy and be informed by.

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Weber: But, I mean, like the fraternities and sororities. So people would come, and they're searching. Obviously, they're not chatting, right? But they would spend time just going in detail through the reviews of different-- that you guys had done?

Brown: Yeah, yeah. Because they're trying to connect to-- if you're in Delta Sigma Theta, you're trying to connect to your sister chapter. If you're at Bowie State University, you're trying to connect to the chapter at Tennessee State University. You can find them in the Universal Black Pages, connect, and maybe you're performing a step that they might want to borrow. All kinds of connections that come out of that connection, even beyond some of the normal reasons why fraternities and sororities connect, job connection, stuff like that. There's a lot more ways that they are coming together and getting together.

Weber: Charlton, do you want to--

McIlwain: Yeah.

Weber: I did-- you know, you-- Derrick, you were starting to talk about some of the tensions with your cofounders, but maybe if Carlton could take us through the tougher parts--

McIlwain: Yeah, that's what I thought I would pick up, if you hadn't already gotten there, which is, you know, kind of revisiting some of those moments where you clearly have a direction in terms of commercializing and looking at and, you know, a business plan, getting investors, so trying to drive this in the direction that some of the folks that you're collaborating with want to go with UBP, but where does that start to fall apart, in terms of tensions with your collaborators and ideas about what the next step should be, what this shouldn't be, so on and so forth.

Brown: Yeah, I don't know if I told you this when we were talking before, man, but we fell apart at our organization meeting, like our official corporate organizing meeting. And it was a very simple fissure. It just revealed, hey, there's already some cracks here. But those cracks were around roles and respect for those roles. I was telling Marc earlier, when you're part of something that's driven by technology, the technologists kind of see themselves as not part of the whole, but maybe the whole of the whole, and this going out and speaking to people, presenting, and connecting, that-- none of that stuff is that important. So I think that kind of created some natural tension between my role as the non-technologist in the group. Certainly, the technology advocate, and maybe the jack-of-all-trades, but not the expert. Definitely not the coder. Once we started having conversations about who was doing what, it became clear, there's not a lot of respect for any of the roles that other people are doing, except for the only roles you have respect for are the roles that you are performing, and that's not how teams work. That's not how teams win. That's how teams lose, and lose precipitously, when we don't respect the other fingers on the hand. That showed up at our organizational meeting, and that resulted in the resignation of one of our directors. One of the directors we had recruited resigned after the meeting, because he saw that we couldn't get along. Saw it. Saw it and said it.

McIlwain: Yes. The fissures became bigger and bigger. What year was that when that started to surface?

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Brown: Yeah, the organizational meeting was mid-1996. It would have been right after we presented the company for the first time to Georgia Tech's business incubator, the Advanced Technology Development Center (ATDC).

McIlwain: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

Brown: Yeah, I told Marc a little while ago that the director at the time, Dwight Holter, pulled me aside after our presentation and basically said, I'm not sure you guys are going to make it. Now, he didn't go into all the reasons why, but he kind of whispered to me, hey, this is what it takes to make a company work. You're building this stool; you've got four legs on the stool. First leg is management, man, and management is the first leg because we're looking at how you guys get along, how you guys know and walk in your roles, and the authority that comes with those roles, and how you respect each other's roles. And we see all of that-- in the way you guys present to us, we notice, you're doing all the talking. This is him telling me, that you're doing all the talking, and that the other guys may not necessarily like that you're doing all the talking, but they don't want to do all the talking. We see stuff like that. I said, okay. And, he said, if this doesn't work, call me. Now, I told Marc, that was the last time I talked to Dwight Holter. He was gone from ATDC like a few days after that, but I was glad we had that one conversation, because I went back to his successor and said, hey, things didn't work out with our company. Is there anything you guys can have me do here? And they said, what are you good at? And I tell them, I'm good at databases. So they allow me to use Lotus Notes to build formal databases for all of their affinity groups, including venture capitalists. I said, oh, so I'm going from knowing absolutely no venture capitalists, to now, I at least know who all the venture capitalists are that fellowship with ATDC. Now, that doesn't mean they're going to talk to me, but at least I know who they are so I can holler at them and see if they might talk to me. So that became a significant experience that grew out of what was some heartbreak and some hardship, where we all kind of broke up and went our separate ways.

McIlwain: Mm-hm. I want to ask you about the Congressional Black Caucus meeting in '96, because I recall that being a-- you know, not so much a turning point, but dovetailing around this point where things are clearly going to split in a direction of, you know, UBP becoming commercially successful in some way or you channeling off at some point into, you know, the sort of original vision that you have for yourself, which is really about the outreach, the community uplift, and that, front and center. But tell us about the CBC meeting in '96. What took you there, why you were in DC, and that meeting of, at the time, tech giants, leaders, vanguard, et cetera.

Brown: All right. Well, now, what got us there is my mom lived in Maryland, in Laurel, Maryland, so we had somewhere to stay. We were bootstrapping and didn't have cash to be spending on traveling like that, but we stayed with my mom and just drove up every day. And I don't remember whether I told you this or not, Tupac was killed, maybe the first day we were up there. This is September 1996, that's when Tupac was killed. I don't want to call the date, but it was like September 13th or something like that. So we drove there with that haze, under that haze, like wow, this just happened. And the African-American internet vanguard met in this large room, during the caucus. And I didn't have great feelings about that meeting. It was a lot of posturing and not a lot of direction. So you saw who all the players thought they were. You saw the people who thought they were the players, and you put names together with sites that

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you've written reviews for. And I don't know if that gave us an information advantage or not, but I took a lot of notes during the meeting of who I remembered, who I met, who sat next to whom, who said what. And when we sat down and debriefed at the end of the day, I said, this was a little chaotic, right, but, now, we'll extract information from this and figure out who we can work with. Now, what we probably saw was there were a lot of people here that we probably can't do much with. There are a lot of people here, I'm not even sure I understand what they're doing, outside of just trying to leverage the internet as some commercial entity, just like they might have done when television was invented. I don't know that we're operating in the same spirit here, so you work with who you can work with, and then you wish everybody else well and leave them alone. But that's what I remember from the Congressional Black Caucus. Now, that was in '96. 1996.

McIlwain: I want to call out one person I know you're familiar with, and I believe you either met there, and your relationship began, if I got the time right, which was Anita Brown. Tell me a little bit about how you met Anita and kind of how your relationship formed in that meeting and then in following.

Brown: Yeah, now, I want to say that would have been the first time I saw her face-to-face, but I had talked to her online a lot, because I saw her as doing something very complementary to what we were doing. She wasn't trying to make a directory or anything, but she had the directory in her head. She knew all the people. And all the people knew her and talked to her, because she was a very connected and compassionate person, very easy to talk to. And you could tell she didn't write code, and she didn't write reviews. She had Bid Whist parties and Rent parties. She was a fun person. But she was also an enthusiast, so she brought a lot of us together who probably wouldn't have known how to get together otherwise. So that would have been the first time I saw her face-to-face, and she was definitely somebody I spent a lot of time with there, and kept in touch with after that. I went to her house several times with the little bit of money that we had, to just sit and talk with her and strategize. Because her group-- she called her group Black Geeks Online, and she had an email newsletter that had a serious reach. Now, she said she had as many as 25,000 members. Now, we never verified it, nobody cared. Everybody knew that if you wanted to get the word out about what you were doing, you let her know and she would send out one of her email blasts. So when we wanted to feature sites, we would ask her to help with that. She would tell us about sites. She would tell us about people, and we just always clicked and worked very well together, and then we were both Browns, so that might have been what made the magic happen. But yeah, she's good people. Good people.

McIlwain: Indeed. I think I want to maybe sort of start to wrap up, at least before we start talking about some of these questions around the present and the future and get to the reflect a little bit on those. But moving from the CBC meeting in ‘96 to the next time that you're in DC in-- it’s either, what, ‘98 or 2002, I believe.

Brown: ’99.

McIlwain: ‘99 with Clinton Administration, so tell us a little bit about how you came to be there. What was different about that moment than in ’96, and then how did that meeting kind of form and start to shape your outlook of what would become sort of the direction you took after that?

Brown: Well experience is a great teacher. So I remember what happened in ‘96, and I said, okay, I know it's not happening in ‘99, and I was lucky enough to be invited in ’99 because we were on the tail end. I would say we were basically defunct at this point. But a young lady named Jena Roscoe, and I remember her name because now, if you see what I'm pointing to directly over my finger there, that's the letter from Janae inviting me to the White House. That's how significant that was. I put that on the wall. She found us the way you found me in 2015, and said, “We want you to be a part of this meeting where we're trying to let the African-American Internet constituency know what the Clinton Administration has done and plans to do insofar as the internet is concerned.”

So I go to that meeting armed with knowing who's going to be there, and I've already made contact with a lot of them before we get there, so we can get together and break bread over meals and figure out where all of this is going. Because at this point, I'm fully invested in KnowledgeBase now. BGSI, the producers of the Universal Black Pages, that's in my rearview mirror. My clear view mirror is KnowledgeBase and everything that KnowledgeBase is about educating and empowering through content. I make contact with Miss DC ---- Anita Brown is Miss DC. She organized a couple of dinners and put key people at key tables so we could sit, and talk, and fellowship. So that one was a much more strategic gathering. There was the usual posturing and whatnot. But now you know who the posers are and who the players are. So you stay away from the posers, and you gravitate towards the players, and you make sure you get time to talk and make that time meaningful.

So I got a lot out of that experience. I got a lot of press out of that experience because there was a reporter from the Atlanta Journal Constitution who got into the briefing. It was not a briefing that the press was advised about. But he got in there somehow and I knew who he was. So I went and sat by him, and he said, “You’re from Atlanta, aren't you?” I said, “Yeah, I'm from Atlanta.” He's like, “So do you have any recollections about what's going on here?” and I had written this manifesto before I got there. So I'm like, “Yeah, I think I can put something together for you.” So I sent him the manifesto. He printed the manifesto word for word. I learned a whole lot about generating press from that experience. I had already written something for him, and he took what I had and put it in the newspaper. I couldn't have bought that much press coverage, but I was able to leverage that into a lot for KnowledgeBase once I got back to Atlanta and got that much ink in the Atlanta Journal Constitution. That worked out well for us. Ended up getting us a lot of business.

McIlwain: Then does KnowledgeBase begin to take off and then what does it become for you?

Brown: Yeah, I told Marc earlier now. We operated some key programs. One was called Project CHIP, Computer Hardware Investigation and Procurement. We are recycling computers before it becomes a thing because I have identified streams of equipment that Georgia Tech turns over like every two years, and some of it is encumbered. Like I can't give it to somebody. So the stuff that's encumbered, I build community technology centers with it and let people come to the technologies and use it in places like Rome, Georgia, and in several places in Atlanta, and those centers became a key marketing vehicle for us where I could go to the centers and do classes, and then the classes became camps, and then I started traveling with the camps. I took the camp to Rome. I took it to Fort Valley.

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Another writer from the Atlanta Journal Constitution, Ernest Holsendolph, began to write a lot about us and he called me Johnny Appleseed or something like that. That stuck. I don't know if I liked being called Johnny Appleseed. I didn't know who he was, didn't know what Johnny Appleseed was. But when he called me Johnny Appleseed, that stuck in a lot of people's minds, so I get people starting to call me from all over the place saying, “Hey, I've got these computers. Can you use them?” So I get that organized and I ended up with a lot of equipment and a lot of people who want the equipment. So I start teaching people how to help me refurbish this equipment, how to help me safely move it, get it in people's hands, kind of onboard them and teach them what they have and how to do good things with it. Our camp grows, so now I've got a lot of momentum and a lot of agency that I might not have had with BGSI and the Universal Black Pages. I'm working not by myself, but I'm working with people that I have carefully chosen and carefully cultivated the types of relationships with that can survive turbulence, the turbulence that you will endure in any kind of startup or entrepreneurial situation.

So I figured some things out, and KnowledgeBase is never going to be a million-dollar company, right, but it's going to be a wealthy company because we're able to do what we set out to do and do it in the name of people and kind of stay true to that. So I've been able to keep that going since 1998, mostly on a part-time basis now, but I've kind of evolved into - I do a lot of shows now. I think when I talked to you for the book, I had just begun to write songs, write music, and I've got a catalogue now that I perform and perform for people, like real people who pay money to come and see me. This jacket that I have on, this is one of my getups that I wear on stage as my homage to Clemson. It’s an homage to the place that I come from. My family has significant Native American and German heritage, and when I wear the color orange, you can kind of see orange tones in my skin that reflect my Cherokee heritage, which I'm proud of and know a lot more about. So this jacket is more than me making some fashion statement, man. It's an important jacket and somebody gave it to me because they thought I looked good in orange. You have no idea.

McIlwain: It was perfect, right?

Brown: Yeah.

McIlwain: So I have a question that might be my last. I know Marc will have a few more after I've got to sign off here. But I think it was the perfect lead up to it. As you look back from Elloree to Clemson, Georgia Tech, and think about the role that you and people like you, black folks, other people of color at a time where our influence in that tech realm was clear and strong for at least that moment, how have you seen that change over the years? Or what's your perspective about what the role black folks have had in both the internet and technology more broadly as the years and decades have gone on, as the business of technology has matured? Have we made progress? Are we in the same place, backwards? What's your sense?

Brown: I’m an eternal optimist but I'm pragmatic to a fault. We can do more. But we have to cast vision, if you will, and say in our community the connections that we seek, they're not wired. They’re social. They’re relationship. Real success is predicated on relationships, equipping, attitude, or mindset, and leadership, and that's got to come from the vanguard of these technology movements, these political

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movements, where we're connecting people. We're not connecting wires. We've got to connect people, and we've got to connect people to resources and knowledge of self, and then skill-based knowledge that helps them leverage what they know into opportunities to grow. That hasn't changed. That's not going to change. We can stay on that M.O. and keep moving forward, no matter what gets invented in the next 50 years.

McIlwain: So the future is bright from your standpoint.

Brown: Yeah. I've got a nine-year-old daughter, man. I've got to see it as bright because I'm leaving the world to her.

McIlwain: Indeed. All right, I think I might take this opportunity to sign off. I've got a 4:00. It was probably a good transition point. Marc, I know you got a few more questions for Derrick. But Derrick, it was good to see you, as always. Good to hear the stories again, a little bit differently, and we'll look forward to staying in touch. I'll follow up with you about this in particular in some follow ups.

Brown: Okay. All right.

McIlwain: All right. Take care.

Brown: Good to see you, man.

McIlwain: All right. Bye, Marc.

Weber: Happy holidays. To go back a little bit with KnowledgeBase, so what was the structure? Was it nonprofit, for profit? Who were you working with?

Brown: It began as a nonprofit and I'm going to call it a closely held corporation now. I actually reconstituted it as a for-profit entity where I generate revenue from the sale of the computers that we don't redistribute, and revenue from the camps, and other programs, and the music that I create. I said, yeah, I want to create something that I can leave to my daughter. So that was an easy decision to no longer be nonprofit where no monies can inure to any of the members through any way other than reasonable salary and fringe benefits. Okay, yeah, we don't want to be nonprofit then. We would like for this to be a for-profit entity, and most of my advisors and partners are family members, are people that I'm really tight with now, and continuing to learn a lesson from the Universal Black Pages days, you have to embrace people who embrace you, and work with people who will work with you, and even if you've got one, two, or a few, that's enough to make significant progress happen as long as you are in right relationship.

Weber: So that's your main day-to-day activity then.

Brown: Yeah. Now I teach high school. Now that's my fulltime gig. KnowledgeBase is my mission that happens while I'm teaching, and certainly for every moment that I'm away from school, I'm largely focused on performing. I've written a one-man show of some of my songs that I hope empower and inspire and

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some of my poetry and prose. I present it all as a one-man show that I am rehearsing for during the holidays, so that I can launch a new review during Black History Month, be onstage and perform in that role. As I get older, I am gearing my interest and my energy moreso towards performing and connecting with people that way. I'm not able to do the same kind of work on the ground through programs. I'm not distributing a thousand computers like I used to when I was younger. It's a different ballgame now.

Weber: So what are you teaching in high school?

Brown: I teach geometry. Geometry, that's the first math course that does away with the rote memorization of processes and calculations where you have to kind of think on your feet and think through things. So that is my sweet spot. That is my niche. I am adept at teaching students how to see, and say, and show. That's my approach to teaching them. You've got to be able to understand what their eyes are telling him, and then articulate it in words, and then do both in front of other people or to other people. You've got to be able to do all of that, see, say, and show.

Weber: I'm sure it's some of the early teachers you're channeling in some way when you're-- yeah.

Brown: Yeah. I think about Dorothy Parler all the time. Think about Yvonne Pinson and think about Carolyn Randolph. Those are teachers that stick out as they put a lot into me and they gave me a lot of techniques that I didn't know I had. But I remember a lot of what they taught me and how they taught me.

Weber: Will your daughter go to your school?

Brown: Yeah. The reason I started teaching is I teach in her school district, and it's a city school district, and we have one high school. So all the kids will come to that high school, including my daughter, and I won't be able to teach her when she is a formal student at our school. But she and I have a very close relationship. Her name is Hannah and she is my heart and my joy. I write all of my songs with her as my audience. I'm trying to speak to her about a world that her daddy has seen that he understands some things about, that he wants to share with her, so that when the student is ready, the teacher will teach, so to speak. So even if she's not ready today, when she is ready, those words will impart something to her, hopefully something meaningful and powerful.

Weber: Yeah, and so you gave examples of that in your own past when people said things that resonated later.

Brown: Yes, sir.

Weber: So you got married somewhere along the way.

Brown: Yeah. I got married to Keisha on March 26, 2011, the greatest day of my life. The greatest day of my life and she gave me Hannah. We gave each other Hannah, and she's a professor, a professor of statistics at Georgia State University, and she's getting her PhD now in education policy. So that's a journey we are on together. That's a journey I know a little bit about, so I'm hopefully of help to her as she

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traverses that path, and she's doing it as an adult, and there's a lot about that kind of study that adulting facilitates very well. You don't have to talk her into studying and identifying resources and being good with her time. These are things that you just learn have to happen in order for any successful venture is something you got to be able to do and be able to do well, and she does it very well.

Weber: In the notes, the very end of Universal Black Pages was 2002. But I mean, there's nothing particularly remarkable. Tell if there's any story there, or if you've already covered it, that's fine. Just that that was the decline and final end, right?

Brown: Yeah. To me we kind of finished in 1998. Yeah, I probably kept it afloat alone during the year 1998, and then had some epiphanies about dividing my energies between KnowledgeBase and keeping the Universal Black Pages afloat, and said, yeah, man, everything at some point has to end. I don't give up Marc, don't give up, and sometimes you have to realize that it's not about giving up at this point. You have to decide where you want to put your energy because you don't have infinite energy. You've got to budget time, and resource, and energy, and decide what's most important for you, and that's when I said, okay, probably time to just let it be. Let it be what it is.

Weber: Yeah. Because Charlton in his book had printed-- I think you had written like an email in '98 when you were trying to keep it going alone, which sounded pretty tough.

Brown: It was overwhelming. I mean we were a victim of our own success. So that's not the worst thing in the world. But like I say, I don't like to give up. So I didn't want to just set it aside. I want to start it, and I want to finish it, and I want to finish it on my own terms, and you just don't get to do that a lot in this life.

Weber: So unless there's any-- I want to turn to looking backward and forward, unless there's-- is there anything else sort of in your chronological story you wanted to talk about?

Brown: No, I'm fine. There's plenty other stuff to talk about now, but we didn't have all day to talk about it. So that's fine. That's fine.

Weber: Okay. So let's see. So I guess, I mean, Charlton touched-- I mean it's somewhat the same, but how has your thinking about the computing field changed over the decades? What will it look like a decade from now and how about access for African-Americans? So we could talk both generally and in terms of the African-American.

Brown: Well, my approach is still as simple as it was in 1994. I am very focused on using the computer almost as an employee in a manner that produces efficient work because efficient work begets agency. If you're able to use that computer to produce in ways that save you time, that time can then be reinvested in purposeful activity. That's how I've always seen it. That's how I've always told it, and sold it, and for people of color time is always of the essence because we're always in situations where we are trying to close gaps in deficits and resources, and that requires time. So you got to buy that time somewhere and I've always seen the computer as a way to buy yourself a lot of time. Efficient use of a computer will buy you a lot of time.

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Weber: Do you think access for African-Americans is improving?

Brown: I teach kids every day, Marc, who do not bring pencils to school, but who always bring cell phones, and I make that point to them the way I just made it to you, and every time I make that point, it's like I'm making it for the first time. So it's not…access is not the issue. I would say attitude, aptitude, and the resulting altitude, those are the issues. Those are the areas of focus for me. So I give my kids lots of stuff. I serve water. I serve snacks. I'll give them pencils if there's a legitimate need for one. But yeah, if you come into my room without a pencil, and you got a cell phone, I tell you to your face, you don't have a resource issue. You got an attitude issue. You got a priority issue and that didn't sound nice because I don't have a nice feeling about it. But that's probably where our challenges lie the most in our communities is priority. Priority.

Weber: Access itself is not an issue.

Brown: Not at all. Not at all.

Weber: It's how you use it, how you use that power.

Brown: Yeah. That is another reason we stopped with the computer distribution. So, I'm like, "Nah, man." We're able to get them. Right? We just got to give good counsel on what to do with them, how to do good things with them. But we've got them. You've got access to them.

Weber: The kind of role or the place that the Universal Black Pages filled in that era, what is the equivalent today, if anything? Is there a place that people, African-Americans can find really, kind of center online?

Brown: There's not a direct replacement, but now there's some-- yeah. Instagram, Twitter, or what they call Black Twitter, those probably. Yeah, those have replaced us. Now I don't know if they're doing as great a job as I'd like to see done. But that's what all of it has kind of morphed and manifested into. That's probably who's replaced us.

Weber: So where do the sororities and fraternities find information today?

Brown: Probably Facebook. Yeah, my kids tell me that Facebook is for older people. I didn't know that. But yeah, it is still very impactful. Even the Clemson alumni, and Clemson alumni who are part of the Greek community, we probably fellowship on Facebook more than anywhere else. It's seamless, and it's prevalent, and it's pretty easy, pretty easy to use.

Weber: So what advice would you have for young people, particularly young people of color, who might be interested in technical fields, or maybe not interested, but should be, or I don't know?

Brown: Do not mistake activity for achievement, just like my great-grandfather told me. You have limited time. You have limited resources. That means you have no time to waste. You have no time to waste,

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and I get onto my students about that a lot, and I'm sure they'd tell you he's-- they tell me I'm off topic whenever I address attitude and behavior, and I'm like, "No, son, I'm right where I need to be because I can't give you Pythagorean Theorem until you show me that you want to study."

Weber: By the way, what your grandfather said, is that your great-grandfather or your grandfather?

Brown: I'm going to say great-grandfather. They both said it now. Probably got it from great-grandfather first.

Weber: Tom Bruce, who wrote the first PC browser (Cello) said, what is it? Never confused knowledge with thinking.

Brown: Yeah. The same church, man. That's just a different pew.

Weber: Yeah. It's like if you have enough knowledge, you can do anything. Wait a second. So for one word, so drawing on your wealth of life experiences, what one word of advice would you give to a young innovator or entrepreneur, and can you tell-- so what is the word and can you tell a story that illustrates why you chose that word? Yeah.

Brown: All right. Yeah. It's a simple story, man. Nothing's going to happen unless you write it. Because when you write it, you think about it, and you create an accountability system with yourself. You will do it if you write it somewhere.

Weber: How would that relate for young people? Let's say you're talking to a young person.

Brown: Ideas, thoughts, find ways to write these things so you can come back to them, even if it's a journal. A lot of people don't like diaries. Well don't have a diary. Have a journal. Just have somewhere where you are recording your thoughts and your ideas, so that you can revisit them, and remember them, especially in this hustle and bustle world we have now that you have to remember some things in order to come back to them, and revisit them, and continue to nurture them.

Weber: Excellent. Anything else you would like to add?

Brown: Well, thank you all for having me here now because I'm very big on oral history. The community that I live in has a big oral history project going on at Kennesaw State University that chronicles the stories of the segregated schools in this area, and I have learned a lot from reading these oral histories, and I find another level of power in using the video medium to record these because if I could hear the Reverend Walter Moon talk about how he organized the election of Marietta's first black city councilman, that is a much more powerful experience than reading his words about them. Though that reading experience was powerful too, it would be even more powerful if I could see him. But that technology may not have existed on that scale back in the early 2000s when they started this project. So we have a lot of written oral histories and now we're trying to build more videos one like this. So what I'm doing with you

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guys I'm going to show to the folks at Kennesaw State and say these oral histories are going on in a lot of places. A lot of good work going on in a lot of places. So thank you for letting me be part of this.

Weber: It's an honor. By the way, your hometown, that sounds like there might be rich material for oral history about the story you learned in 2015.

Brown: Yes, sir. Yes, sir. I recorded that event and I kept it. I just haven't done anything with it. But all the people who were part of that first group that integrated, 20 of them came back, and we sat in the same room for five hours and let all of them come and speak their truth. It was powerful and I recorded all of it.

Weber: Well, thank you.

END OF THE INTERVIEW

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