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Lillian Johnson Interview, Interim Director of Bolinga Cultural Resources Center, Wright State University

Alyce Earl Jenkins

Wright State University - Main Campus

Lillian Johnson

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Profiles of African-Americans That Helped Shape Wright State University

Interview with Lillian Johnson

Date of Interview: September, 1992

Interviewer: Alyce Earl Jenkins, College of Education and Human Services

Interviewee: Lillian Johnson, Interim Director of Bolinga Cultural Resources Center

Alyce Earl Jenkins: My guest today is Mrs. Lillian Johnson, Interim Director of the Bolinga Cultural Resources Center. Lillian prior to talking about the Bolinga Cultural Center, tell me about your academic preparations and your previous positions which you've held here at Wright State.

Lillian Johnson: Prior to, to going to the Bolinga Center I was a Assistant Director in the Career Services office which at that time was called Career Planning and Placement. And prior to that I was an Academic Advisor in the University Division, so I've, I've been at Wright State for about a total of of five years. I have a Master's degree in Human Resources and my undergraduate degree is Art Ed.

AJ: Well, that's interesting, that's very interesting. So you've been Interim Director since 1990 at the Bolinga Center. How do you respond to the question, "What does the center do?" when asked by parents, community leaders, students, other University faculty and staff? How do you respond to that question?

LJ: Well, basically I say that the Bolinga Center provides programs and activities specifically designed for the black students at Wright State. We are there to assist the students in retention and graduation. We are there to have a place for students where they can go to feel comfortable, to be among others like themselves. We serve as an advocate for the students, um, and sometimes I suppose a sanctuary for the right students at Wright State.

AJ: That's interesting that you use the term, 'sanctuary'. Um, why, tell me a little...

LJ: I, I think that sometimes they just feel that they just need to get away from being a very visible minority on campus.

AJ: When you came to the Center, you've been Interim Director since 1990, but you actually came to the Center in 1989?

LJ: I, I started working with the Center in '89, I did the orientation programs during the summer for Dr. Dobson who was the, the Director at that time. And I did a lot of programs with Dr. Dobson as, as the Assistant Director of Placement and Career Counseling and those kinds of things because he didn't have anyone specifically designated for doing that within, within Bolinga, and once he was approved to have an Assistant Director, I applied for the job and moved down there.

AJ: Okay then, so when he left in 1990 you moved into the Interim position.

LJ: Not right away. I stayed there as the Assistant Director while the University was still deciding on whether or not they wanted to advertise the job. We were at that time starting this budget crunch, and so the University decided that they would freeze that position as well as a lot of other positions on campus, and once they made that decision then I was asked to fill in and be Interim Director.

AJ: I see. Now although you've only been in the Center a couple of years now, you've been on campus and so you've been aware of various activities that were sponsored by the Center. Perhaps this is an unfair question, but I'll ask it anyway and you can respond, what can you tell me about some of the activities and accomplishments which occurred during Dr. Dobson's tenure there?

LJ: Well, I think that when, when I look back at the history of the Bolinga Center and various directors, I think that the Bolinga Center itself took on a character reflecting the directors. And Dr. Dobson was an English Ph.D. He was very much concerned about the cultural development of students, and during the time that Dr. Dobson was there, he increased programs relating to black culture. We had a lot of black writers during the time that he was there. So the programs during his time were more focused on that aspect, writing, literature more so than I think in the past.

AJ: Okay. Now he, he was director from '84 until 1990, six years.

LJ: Six years right.

AJ: I see. One of the writers, I think that he had on campus, was Gwendolyn Brooks, um, and out of her visit here on campus, grew the Dunbar Poetry Awards. Tell me a little about that.

LJ: Well, when Gwen Brooks came here it was part of a grant and it was co-sponsored with the Department of English. And so she was here for a couple of days and during that time in addition to attending classes and reading here poetry, um, we took her to Dunbar High School and she was part of the assembly. And, the reaction of the students was so great, she loved it so much that she decided to start a contest in Frank's name, Dr. Dobson's name. Just the enthusiasm of the students and if you've

ever been to the Dunbar Assembly you know that they are very verbal about their pleasure and their displeasure, so I think the reaction of the students inspired her to do that. So, she started the Dunbar Poetry Contest and it has grown. It started off with I think some 60 entrants and this past year, which was the last year of the poetry contest, there were 200. Um, so the Dunbar administrators were very pleased with it. Gwen Brooks has always responded every year and we send her the poetry winners and she always has some comments about the change and so it's been a real successful poet, poetry contest as well as a successful connection with the community.

AJ: What is the award? Is it a plaque?

LJ: The, she presents, or she has a \$500 award that we split \$100 for each of the top five winners, we select ten and of the ten we rank them for the first top five. So the \$500 that she send, that she sends is divided up to \$100 each to the top five. The University matches that, the College of Liberal Arts and the Department of English both match \$500 so there is a \$1000 given to one of the seniors attending Wright State that next year.

AJ: That's very nice, very nice.

LJ: And that will continue.

AJ: That's very nice. That's very nice, and I think you just recently had the Dunbar Poetry Awards.

LJ: Yeah, we just finished the awards and had our luncheon, we usually have a luncheon in January, and [Tineka] Scott was the winner of the \$1000 award so [Tineka] will be here next year and we'll continue to monitor her and track her and hope that she graduates as most of them have, um, so we're looking forward to that.

AJ: I have a picture here of [Doc Pacernick] and Dr. Dobson and one of the recipients when they made the first award I guess in 1988. One of the things that you said when you were discussing the Dunbar Poetry Award is that it is a cooperative program, a venture between the Bolinga Cultural Resources Center and the Department of English. Have you had any other cooperative sponsorship programs with other colleges, if so, give me some examples.

LJ: We co-sponsor almost all of our programs with some other unit or department on campus. The College of Business has been very good in co-sponsoring a lot of our activities. We had a series called, "In the Black", and we brought it black businessmen and the College of Business paid for the reception that we had for that, also paid for some of the advertising we did and were very good about getting information out about that particular program. The School of Professional Psychology also co-sponsors many

of our programs. We work with the different Student Affairs offices. We work with orientations and tours, we work with the SOLD office...

AJ: What's the SOLD office?

LJ: The Student Office of Leadership and Development. But about every office on campus works with us in some way. Either in a small way, just allowing us have use of facilities, or contributing students to assist us, or financially, financial support. There is a peace group that is starting to work on the campus and we've been asked to co-sponsor some of their activities, participate in some of their receptions. So just about every, every aspect of the University is touched some way with the programs and activities of Bolinga.

AJ: You mention the College of Business co-sponsoring programs, I believe it was a year ago, maybe two years ago, that Joshua Smith, President and CEO of Maxima, was here, was that co-sponsored by Business?

LJ: Yeah, they actually, the College of Business was real instrumental in getting him here. We, we got the final notice that he would be coming so we were real pleased with that and really surprised because it really wasn't our initial intent to bring him in since we were just focusing on local people but you know, he does have a company here and so

AJ: And he has ties here.

LJ: Yes he does.

AJ: I remember him as a student at Central State and I think he has a sister who lives in Dayton, so that was nice.

LJ: I'm also a Central alum

AJ: Yes, I was kind of pulling for that earlier.

LJ: Yes.

AJ: Now tell me about some of the other programs that you do, I think...

LJ: Just about every day there's something going on. We have annual programs. We've got the Black Family Day program, I don't know if you mentioned that. We will have a program, Mother's Day, we have a banquet at the end of the year. I'm trying to think, just about every quarter there is a major event that we sponsor or co-sponsor with other departments but then we just have ongoing programs, um, we are continuing the "In the Black" series. Now the "In the Black" that we did when Joshua Smith was here, uh, by, just the circumstances it turned out that all of the speakers during that series were males.

And so I told Dr. Dobson when he was here at the time that the next time that we had to have females and so this year our “In the Black” series is all females, and that was by choice, by design. We have other speakers that are sprinkled out through the year that are not necessarily women but the, the series it’s called “In the Black” is all female this year.

AJ: In addition to the “In the Black” program that you were talking about with J.I. Smith, Joshua Smith from Maxima, who are some of the other speakers that you’ve had as part of the minority speakers series?

LJ: We have had Naomi Tutu who is the daughter of Desmond Tutu. Martin Luther King the Third was one of our speakers for the banquet. Rita Dove who is the second black poetry Pulitzer poetry winner. Angela Davis. Walter Fauntroy. Patricia Russell-McCloud. Um, I’m trying to think of some others. The minority speakers series are speakers that are nationally known as opposed to our community speakers series which are our regional community speakers and when we spoke before about the “In the Black” series, those were a part of the community speakers series, so that, the national people are part of the minority speakers series. We’ve had [Tyrone Crider] here twice. Um, we’ve...

AJ: He was with Operation PUSH.

LJ: He was, yeah he was the Executive Director of Operation PUSH, yes, he has since left there, but we had him while he was still the Executive Director. Um, we have also had a lot of local State Representatives, Rhine McLin; Tom Roberts; and some of the other Representatives for our area in the State.

AJ: When you talk about the national speakers, minority speakers who are nationally known, I’m reminded of Alex Haley who came before you were here and also Tony Brown, so I think it’s really great that we still have that program that has been ongoing throughout the existence of the Center. When we think about some of the activities and accomplishments during Dr. Dobson’s tenure, we think about the Dunbar Poetry series, the Dunbar Poetry Awards, the In the Black program. What about some other organizations that, I remember hearing about Black Men on the Move, was that an organization that started after he arrived?

LJ: Yes, it was. We had another program that was called Models program; mentors offering direction, encouragement, and leadership strategies toward success. And, the students that worked with that program initially were graduate students from the School of Professional Psychology. And, those students were instrumental in starting a lot of the support groups that we have. The Black Men on the Move started with the graduate students from the Black Men, from the School of Professional Psychology. Black Women Striving Forward started from the females in the School of Professional Psychology. The, those two groups had their ups and downs in terms of leadership as

well as participation but they continued and they are at this point very strong groups on campus. The membership is very strong, the activities that they are doing, uh, they're taking leadership roles, um, in the Wright State black community as well as just the Wright State student community. The National Society of Black Engineers was also started by Dr. Dobson. I don't know if that was a direct result of inquiries or if it was something that he just thought they ought to have, but we did start that. It's a very small group now I don't think they even have officers but we continue. We, we get the information about the national group and every year we tend to sponsor a trip for three or four students however many would be willing to go to the national conference. It's one of the other things that we do that people aren't aware of, in the Bolinga Center is that besides the programs, some of the activities that we co-sponsor or facilitate are transportation costs for students to attend some of the leadership workshops, some of the conferences in the area. We don't advertise them but when students come to us and say that we'd like to go, two or three, Bolinga usually will pay for the van and transportation costs and oftentimes pay for the registration fees for a lot of those students.

AJ: That's that's good and that's very important to have that kind of experience while you're in college because once you become a professional you have to do those kinds of things.

LJ: Right.

AJ: When you were talking about the Models program I was reminded of the Models banquet that they had back in '87 and they had a Models scholarship award, do they still have that or what happened with that? Or was that a one-time award?

LJ: Well, I, we have continued to give an award for Models. The Models students, the first group of Models students graduated two years ago, and two years ago we also discontinued Models. And the reason for that really was economics; that it takes a lot of money to pay for the mentors, to pay for the activities that we were doing at the time, so we're continuing that kind of support but not at the level that we were doing under the headline of Models. Some of those students that were in the Models program either the mentors or the students who were being mentored, are still at Wright State and we are still giving some kind of award at our banquet every year. It ranges about \$250. Most of it is whatever money we have left from our other scholarship money or money that has been donated to the Center, whatever we've got in the pot is what goes to a Models student.

AJ: Okay. When you were talking about the various organizations, you were talking about the ones for the different academic areas, I think there is also a group over in Business too, or there was a group over in Business, tell me a little bit about the Greek

organizations for black students. I remember very vividly when the Phi Beta Sigma fraternity organized their chapter here back in the '70's and they were quite proud of their group. What other organizations are accessible to our students and how do they know about them, how do they get to know about them?

LJ: Most of the sororities and fraternities that are here on campus belong to a city-wide chapter, and so depending on the numbers, the information may not filter this way as readily and as often as we would like. Right now the Alpha Kap Alpha sorority is a city-wide chapter and the majority of the students in that organization are at UD, so they tend to not get us information here real quickly for the students that are interested, but we do have one or two that will join during each year. The same thing with Delta Sigma Theta sorority. They're a city-wide chapter and they're outside of UD and the numbers at UD are a lot larger than the numbers here so we have two or three that belong to that chapter. We are trying to get the information in a more timely fashion and, and hope to get the information to a larger number of students so we would have a larger representation here. The Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, I believe is a Wright State fraternity, the chapter, and, so their numbers are larger here than they are at UD. Uh, Kappa Alpha Xi is also here on campus but it is a small representation. Omega Xi Phi fraternity just recently took over a large number of student, um, city-wide, and so I think there may be about four or five on this campus and that's a fairly new fraternity here on campus, they were not represented before that at the undergraduate level. We have quite a few graduate fraternity members for that, that particular fraternity. I don't think that there are any Sigmas at this point, or their fraternities. We have no Sigma Gamma Rho sorority on this campus either, um, so.

AJ: Nor Zettas

LJ: Nor Zettas right. Um, but, Zettas have had a couple of rushes and so I think the end of this year we'll see some Zettas on this campus or the beginning of next year I'm fairly sure of that. But, you know, the Greek, the Greek life is active, it's just not as large as what I was familiar with on a predominately black campus but it's growing and I think a lot of that is just reflective on the number of black students that are here at Wright State, the number is growing, so I suspect that number should also grow.

AJ: Yeah, when you mention the numbers, uh, I read in the Dayton Daily News a month or so ago that of the area colleges Wright State has 5.6% black enrollment and that translates to a thousand black students, that's the largest number I think that in the history of the university. What kinds of things do you do directly related to the academic area? I recall when the center was started back in '72, that there was a strong push to have faculty members to integrate content into their various courses regarding the African American experience, there was a strong concern about having a Black Studies program and there was also a move to try to recruit more black faculty because there

weren't very many of us here at that time. And, you've talked about the co-sponsorship programs, are there any other activities? Workshops or anything that you do?

LJ: For the University, we have made great strides in that we now have a minor in African American Studies, um, so the move to do that has been fruitful. Um, I'm not sure about the recruitment of black faculty and/or staff as well, but uh we, we recruit a number and then we also lose a fair number so that I think that the numbers have remained fairly static, you know some years they go up and then some years they go down, but that's a University mission and goal. But in terms of Bolinga and what we do because my background is academic and coming from the University Division which is all you do is focus on academics, um, what I have done is spend more time in that we do have uh, tutors from the Writing Center that are there uh three days a week. I close the Bolinga Center down every day with the exception of Friday, so Monday through Thursday Bolinga is closed from 3 to 5 for study hours. We also use that time for tutoring.

AJ: I think that this current administration has done quite a lot as for recruiting black faculty and I am simply busting with pride over the fact that we have the first time in the history, the 27 year history of this University, we have four black people who are in the promotion and tenure process, whether they get through that process, we're hopeful that they will, but the fact that we have four, uh, that's a direct result of the active recruiting and effort to keep people that has been demonstrated by this current administration that we have. One of the things that started back in '71 related to the Bolinga Center, the part dealing with the cultural resources aspect of the center was that they wanted to have the Dunbar Library, the Paul Laurence Dunbar Library, and I recall that they hired [Barbara Forth Foster] to work in the mail library and to be acquisition person for our library, the Paul Laurence Dunbar Library. And over 3000 books were acquired dealing with African American history, and we were real pleased and real happy to have that library associated with the center, and I think that made the center somewhat unique and different from centers at other universities. Recently that center was moved, to the the Paul Laurence Dunbar Library was moved to the main library and we've lost some space, I see that we've lost space and we've also lost a significant part of the resource center. How do you think the space is going to be recovered or if it's going to be recovered and do you know whether or not the library is being used over there, the Paul Laurence Dunbar Library, being used as much as it was, uh, when it was associated with the center?

LJ: I think that the loss of the library was a significant loss for us. Not only the loss of space because in fact we would not be able to use the space for a lot of study or presentations or anything like that, but the, the space itself with the books and the resources that were there I think was invaluable to us. That's sad that we've lost that. I don't know really what to do to regain that.

AJ: We talked about I think, the Family Appreciation Day, you mentioned that's going to, that that's coming up again I guess this year, and I was a part of the group that helped to organize that, that came up with the idea and said, 'let's get this rolling', and I kind of had in mind the Mothers' Organization at Central State that's really very well organized with all the officers and everything. Do you see this program, the Family organization, or the Family Appreciation Day, growing into a formal organization or is it just an observance that we have once a year?

LJ: I hope so.

AJ: There are no officers or anything.

LJ: I hope so, I hope so but you know, um, I don't know. I don't know the psychology of the parents or the students. We've had a real hard time getting the alums to develop into a group. And, um, and for the most part the parents haven't connected to Wright State, which is very similar to the way that the students haven't really connected. The Black Family Day Program has grown a lot from when it first started, not as large as we would hope, but every year it continues to grow. The present format, in the beginning it was just a reception, a gathering. And the present format now has a reception at the beginning and then we have a speaker and then we break into small groups to discuss or give the information about programs here at Wright State; to discuss some of the problems that the students have had as well as try to offer some solutions as to what can parents do.

AJ: Maybe one thing that the center might do and also maybe the organization for black faculty and staff might assist is to have a quarterly newsletter for family, maybe that might give them a feel, you smile, has that been tried?

LJ: We have tried newsletters and..

AJ: And that doesn't work?

LJ: No, when I say tried newsletters, the idea has been there. We just don't have the budget to do any of that and one of my charges as Assistant Director was to start a Black Parent group and we met every quarter. The participation, for me, I said it was not, it was not very good, Dr. Dobson thought it was great because in the past there might have been three or four people that had shown up and we had about 20 parents that showed up and that were fairly consistent. This present, Black Family Day program, the format came out as a result of those meetings that I had with parents, what they wanted, what they wanted to see.

AJ: That's good, that's good. So, very good. One final question, we haven't talked about the Bolinga Scholarship, I think that got started back around '75 or '76 when Art

Thomas was here and Al Smith approached him about making that kind of opportunity available and recognize students who had achieved. What is happening with that? Is the scholarship, Bolinga Scholarship program still in existence and do you ever come in contact with any of the recipients?

LJ: The scholarship is still going strong in terms of us awarding money every year. The funds that we get for the scholarship come from the donations of the faculty and staff through the University CSC fund, Campus Scholarship Campaign. And, what I've heard from the administrators here, the people who work with that money, the overall amount of the money that comes in, is that it is a rarity for a university this size and this type of university to collect so much money from their own employees, the faculty and staff, and so it's been a real profitable source of scholarship money. The, the problem for us, is that you have to designate that you want that money to be used for the Bolinga Center Scholarship, and we don't have as many people designating Bolinga Center as in the past because now they are just a whole lot of you know, just as in the nation, there are a whole lot of people out there who need money and, and you have a whole lot of affiliations with other groups and since you have a choice, most people are designating other areas, other departments, other units. And, so we're not getting as much money through that fund as we had in the past. Um, every once in a while we get some private donations. Harry Mayo, of Mayo Industries, donated money. There are some other people, uh, because we can't solicit. It's one of the university's rules and regulations that we can't go out and solicit, we've got to get it through the Development Office, so that hampers it a little bit. One year, Dr. Howard, who is the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, allowed us to use some money from the scholarship committee, money that was left over, money that had not been given out to students, so we were able to get \$5000 from that, from that committee and we gave five \$1000 awards. And then we have some small awards. There's a Lucas Scholarship that we give. All of the scholarships that are specifically designated for black students, no matter where the money comes from, is awarded through the Bolinga Center or through our awards banquet. Either acknowledged at that time or presented at that time. So the College of Engineering, the College of Business, all of those other departments and colleges that are going to award money, although it might be their own money and it's not anything coming from us, will send us something so we can award it or acknowledge that an award is being given to a particular black student. Um, where are those students now? Many of them are still here, uh, one of them, one of the pictures that you had was Charlotta Taylor receiving an award. Charlotta has since graduated and she has returned to Wright State as a graduate student and she now works in the Bolinga Center as our graduate assistant. Charlotta was also president of the Black Student Union when she was, when she was here. Uh, we have other students, [Victoria Piagler] is a reverend but she is taking course here still. She is the main pianist for the gospel choir. [Robert Gatliff] is a recent award recipient and he is the student building manager

in the University Center. So, most of the students that have received awards, are, are still here and they're involved. They're involved in the university community and they're involved in the Dayton community. One of the things when we talked before about the Models program, many people ask about the Models program and one of the questions is always was the Models program successful or did I think it was successful, and it depends on how you measure success. When you look at it academically the overall GPA of the students in that program or any of the other programs that we have, Peer Supportive Service program, any of those programs, the overall GPA of those students is, is not much different than the overall GPA of the majority of the black students here on campus. But when you look at the students themselves that were in the program, there is a greater number of students that participated in those programs who have now assumed leadership roles in the community or within the Wright State community as opposed to the other students who don't participate in any of those things. So I think it was very successful in getting students involved and getting students connected into Wright State. You know, we talk about the retention and the graduation rates of those students, and, and, that's where we're making headway. When we get them involved, when we offer them assistance, tutoring, just peer mentoring, a place to be, those are the students who continue and graduate which is our ultimate goal.

AJ: That's right, to have more graduates.

LJ: Absolutely.

AJ: Thank you so much Lillian for sharing with us.

LF: Okay. Thank you.