

Tacoma Community History Project
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Narrator: **Dr. Maxine Mimms Ph. D.**
Date: **May 7, 2014**
Interviewed by: **Robin Eisenbacher**
Place: **Tacoma, WA**

Robin Eisenbacher: This is Robin Eisenbacher interviewing Dr. Maxine Mimms, we're in Tacoma WA, it is May 7th 2014 and we're at the Hob Knob. First off tell me a little about yourself, where are you from, where were you born?

Dr. Maxine Mimms: I was born in Newport News, Virginia. And educated in the Virginia schools there, and all the way through my Bachelor's. Went to Detroit Wayne State to get my Master's, and came out of San Francisco Union Graduate School for my Ph. D.

RE: What was your experience like in the education system as a student growing up?

MM: In the South?

RE: Yeah.

MM: Horrible! A lot of my learning came formally as well as informally because Newport News is not very far from Hampton University. So Hampton University had a lot of learning centers at that time, and learning opportunities because of segregation, and my father and mother did a lot of teaching in their own homes. So they talk about home school now, but many, many of the southern people like myself are educated by their parents and relatives and other teachers in the neighborhood. So we had a lot of learning centers, we had a lot of cohorts develop. But in terms of the formal situation, we didn't know exactly what was going on and everything, but we knew that there were second hand, if you will, hand me down experiences. Text books and budget was always an issue. And you always heard your parents talking about things could be better.

RE: What made you decide to really pursue a career in education versus something else?

MM: I don't know whether I decided or if whether I was born this way? I mean, I think if you understand the segregated south we were selected and encouraged by neighbors, parents,

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friends, and church people to go forth and do this. I didn't even know college was separate from high school. I mean, when you were born you went on to college, that is what I saw. Because everybody in my hometown would go to Columbia University to get degree, Fisk and Lahariah, places like that so I heard a lot from childhood about the preparation through historical black colleges. My mother was a teacher and I saw a lot of teaching and learning in my home. So I don't think there was any . . . you know I am trying to even figure if I ever had a choice.

RE: Just fell right into it. So what brought you to Washington, and the Tacoma area?

MM: Oh god I fell in love with somebody and got married and he was recruited from Michigan to come out to University of Washington. And I got married in 53 and came out here in 53.

RE: So when you got here what was your impression of the public school system, in the Tacoma area specifically.

MM: Tacoma?

RE: Yeah.

MM: I didn't come straight to Tacoma, we came to a small town called Bellevue at that time, and I went into the Seattle public school system. And left that system in 69 and was there from 53 to 69. And what did I think about it?

RE: Yeah.

MM: I was proud of it. It was fine I mean the 50's through the 60's, it was just a wonderful time for me.

RE: So I have done a little bit of background research just looking at some of your time at Evergreen. I had found some different articles and stuff. Tell me about the decision of bringing Evergreen to Tacoma and what was the motivation for that?

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MM: I left the district; I left Seattle public schools in 1969 and went back to Washington D.C. to work in the Nixon Administration as the Assistant Director to the Women's Bureau with Libby (Elizabeth) Koontz. Libby Koontz was the first black president of NEA, the National Education Association.

But before I had left this area I had been called upon to work on various committees and looking at a new approach to higher education in this state. [Brief Interruption] Committees like you have around. And they were always thinking about having a southwest campus for the University of Washington back in those days. They always talked about site based campuses, small campuses like in Bothell or here in Tacoma. When I went to Evergreen, and I was recruited to be on the faculty in 1972, and I discovered that we were out in Olympia. And I mean out in Olympia. I was not going to come from Washington DC and being in the south and participate in education that was totally white oriented and I just said no.

So I started in my kitchen teaching black students and went from there. We went from the kitchen to houses, various houses and if you look up all that you can find it, and various places and spaces until you have the place on 6th Avenue now.

And for the record, I always wanted this record to show that because of the University of Washington, and I knew Michael and all of them, I do not approve of a branch campus of a research university that has completely ignored the needs of urban communities and it happens everywhere in America. Your large universities have the research dollars and they can go and get the paid boards. But it's not about teaching and learning it is about exactly what it is, and that is about research, that's what brings the dollars. I was not interested in that, I was interested in a school that would come in, they could learn how to be leaders in their communities and serve their community. Go back to your community and take this privileged education that you have from the state and do something with it. And that was my goal, one of them. In truth, there were two goals that I had, that was access for black people and retention of black people. So I spent a lot of time on those

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two things. And then eventually if you can retain then you can begin to get the scholarships and the research, but we first have to change that.

I was pissed when we did all the work to bring a four year institution here, these very people that helped to bring this four year school that you are going to [referring to the University of Washington Tacoma], fought this one. Because anybody with any sense realizes in an urban area if you can have four years of a liberal studies on education it allows you to analyze and think and grow. It is going to lift a community, it is going lift a community. Just like you are able to say now as a female in this City of Tacoma I am at the University of Washington campus but I am going to stay right there and go right on in to my masters in teaching and you will be able to come and serve the Tacoma community. That privilege needs to be offered to black people, people of color the same way. And it's there [at Evergreen Tacoma]. I have lived long enough to see graduates from this campus, and I do not know the number but I think I have heard it is about thirty-five hundred that have come out of the Tacoma campus and I have lived long enough to feel pride and to say that. You know?

RE: That is amazing.

MM: It is a real challenge and if you are going into education you're not going to turn it around over-night. I mean, if you really are going in there with the idea and the understanding that I am here for the long haul. These people that I am responsible for helping look at things another way and it is a long haul, and it is very, very, very rewarding. It's a field that every day there is some joy. Every day, every day! I mean I can't think of another field where the experience is so rewarding on a daily basis.

RE: Wow, that is what I am looking for. You answered that question for me all ready.

RE: We kind of talked about Evergreen. Was there a main philosophy of the campus?

MM: For me when I started?

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RE: Yeah.

MM: Access. To have access to higher education. To come into the arena, come into the area, and begin to feel the ability to experience the genius and be applauded for the genius. And retention, to be able to meet a challenge and to stick with it. Be encouraged to stick with it. So my philosophy at that time and what I wanted to do was exactly what I did. That was to recruit and have a diverse population that is extraordinary, that has been extraordinary and to retain. Come in, graduate.

RE: Since your time at Evergreen I have looked up a little bit about the Maxine Mimms Academy. Tell me about that because that was really cool.

MM: I came and retired in 1990, thinking that I had really made a dent in education and comfortable. And one day I was somewhere, maybe a restaurant I can't remember exactly where, a woman came to me and said her grandson had been kicked out of school and she had nowhere to take him. I had never heard of that, I had been in education and you know you suspend and it is a three day suspension a five day suspension, but this was an expulsion. And I think that he had a knife or a gun or weapons. No tolerance, zero tolerance, and I think zero tolerance leads to expulsion, expulsion from the school and is also expulsion from the district. And I worked with that, and I discovered from that young person, so many of our young people are out of school on a long term suspension, short term expulsion, and so I opened a school for those who were suspended or expelled. And that is what I did in 2004. And that is when I started the partnership with the many, many agencies is here. Our first two years we were able to return I think six hundred children to the school setting. The key thing was not to keep them out, but was to do something in this atmosphere and then negotiate their return to school on conditions that we would continue to work with them.

RE: What type of strategies do you use at the academy as far as to accomplish that? To get them back on track?

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MM: The thing that educators must understand there is no such thing as just one strategy.

Everything for every child in this society has to be custom made. I mean a child may not be able to read and may simply need a compliment for the hem in their t shirt. And you may just look at that child and say that ‘tomorrow when you come back to school I want you to tell me as many stories about the t shirts in your house.’ And the child comes back and says ‘my daddy wears a t shirt’ you write that down, *daddy-wear- a-t shirt*. This child will learn to read it *daddy-wears-a-t shirt*. Every child has to be seen really truly as an individual in the group, because when you enter into education as a child the key thing that educators do is to remove the identity of the child because once you remove that identity then the control can take place, and then you become an institution that allows for us to be the beginning of the control. When you leave home and you have your name and you own your name, and then the teachers says ‘boys and girls line up.’ As soon as that teacher says ‘boys and girls line up’ your identity as Herman and your identity as a girl Helen goes. You just become a boy and girl, and you are just like a herd, you just march along. And if you don’t color inside of the line or if you don’t follow the rules of this particular thing, then you are labeled as something that is different; and sometimes those differences are categorized as negative. So you have to in the field of education, you have to look at each child as a member of the group, not the group following a set of rules and a standard. And once you find yourself as an educator being flexible. I’ll give you an example from my third grade students at Leschi School, I am amazed at what they tell me, they are 6 to 5 and 6 to 7, 7 there now. And I taught them how to square dance because I wanted to teach black children about math and about a way to lead and follow square dance is excellent. And they tell me about their experiences they had. I was the first black teacher that wore high heels and would square dance in high heels. The teacher has to be exotic and creative enough to bring an atmosphere into the classroom that it is all right to be different. If we can get to the differences and applaud those [claps], then we’re not constantly looking for the formality of the form to obey and replace.

And education is a model of obey the form and replace it, replace your parents, always believe that there is someone out there greater always believe the author of whatever

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book that you have is a much better writer than your grandmother. Always believe that the teacher is a much better person than the person who first started teaching you, which was your mother or someone. Always replace those things that you are close to, with something that is abstract. I had black people running around talking about Madame Bovary and Freud. I mean all of these people that they are never going to need. So who's the Freud in your family? Uncle Henry. Uncle Henry you know what did he do that was like Freud? What does he do that is like Erickson? Who is the philosopher in your family? And when we begin to pull those images out of young people. Oh my god, learning takes place just like that. The stories. Because there are multiple stories to simple stories. So there are multiple stories and we got to get that out of our young people and our old people too. Because, you will find yourself replacing every family member with somebody in a textbook. And that is the goal of education. To have conformity to the point that control is just paramount. You have to be very careful as an educator you have to bring some real risky stuff in your own behavior into the class room.

RE: I thought about that because they have all of the standardized testing. And it seems like that will be a challenge.

MM: No. It is not. It is no big deal. You must remember money is money. And you create a test every five years. I remember when Cuisenaire Rods became the thing. And these little children in the inner city in Seattle had little bags. Little red rod, yellow rod, and parents found it so wonderful that they used them as fireplace kindling. We learned a lot about Cuisenaire Rods, we learned a lot about what you do with little wood chips, [laughs] look we have wood chips. And I thought it was just funny. I thought it was interesting, you just do it. Create things.

This section of the country with the beautiful beautiful green stuff, and how this rain comes down and is able to wash away the diseases. As you wash away some of the parts of the bad parts of the environment with the rain. We can't stand it look what it turns into. I mean, to not have field based education in this state on these good days, blows me away. A class in Wright Park, there is just so much to teach here.

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RE: You touched on this a little bit, but just a more direct question. What do you think educational opportunity does for people personally? What does it do for their spirit? What does it do for their drive in achieving things in life?

MM: What do you mean, educational opportunity?

RE: Giving them an educational opportunity you are talking about access and retention, once you are giving them access what does that do for them?

MM: Oh my gosh . . . I don't like words like self esteem and stuff like that. But I think it just expands your confidence. A degree doesn't mean anything it's just simply a union ticket to validate a skill set.

[brief interruption from waitress]

But the marching across the stage and the getting your diploma in June. In the case of me and Evergreen and watching so many first generations go across in some green hat and a green robe, and hearing the screams and the applause and the crying and the emotional response to a moment is extraordinarily rewarding. And I think that everybody in America that wants to go into higher education needs that opportunity to experience that moment, whatever that moment is, and it is different for everybody.

RE: When you look back over your time in the Tacoma area and education, do you feel like things have changed a lot?

MM: Yeah, because I've changed. I see things different. I am less critical and much more creative the older I get. I can recognize the genius in people much quicker than I did when I started out; because I started out with a formula given to me that is person is special Ed and this person is advanced, and that needs to be in advancement. I started out with a system telling me exactly how to observe. There was a formula for my observation. When I broke free of that, then I began to see the humanity in all my students I could see thousands of geniuses, thousands! And I began to be a little more creative myself. But I was able to break away from the form. So therefore I was able

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to remove myself from the classification and the judgment. Because in this field you can really judge a lot.

RE: What would be your advice to someone like me who is going into education that wants to make a difference?

MM: If you are going into education, [brief interruption] before you really begin to respond with the requirements of it, get clear on what your hobby is. It's your hobby that you are going to teach in relationship to the subject matter. If you are a singer and you are going to teach in the K-12 system, and you've been assigned to social studies or history. Bring your musical ability into that subject. Always as a teacher keep your hobby. Your hobby which you have a lot of passion about, keep it in the forefront and don't neglect it, when you neglect your hobby you will neglect your career.

RE: That is all of the formal questions I have for you.

MM: Oh Good.

RE: Is there anything else you would want to discuss or share with me today?

MM: Oh no.

RE: Thank you so much for meeting today.