

Patricia Cummings Oral History Transcript
March 31, 2020

Interviewer: Heather Lewis

Heather: Okay, there we go. This is an oral history interview with Patricia Cummings, the dates today is March 31st 2020, and we are recording this as part of a course at Pratt entitled "Beyond and Between Pratt's Gates." So, now that you have told me about your anecdotal memory, maybe we can just begin with you not going all the way back, but you know, how you got to Pratt and the history of your education, and you know, how you got to Pratt.

Patricia: I wanted to go to an art school. My father was military so we moved around a lot as a kid and I've never gone to the same school twice until I got to the 11th grade. And when I told him I wanted to go to Pratt, he told me that New York eats 18 year-old girls, because I've always lived on army bases and he was completely, not terrified, but very nervous about me coming to the big city. And he said, New York eats 18 year-old girls and I'm thinking that sounds right. He dropped me off at Willoughby, at the dorm and he was like, do you need anything? And I said, no I'm good dad, go. And about, I would say within 20 minutes, half an hour I was completely lost. I had wandered away from the campus I thought I would go explore, but I couldn't find my way back to Willoughby. And I must've wandered for about two hours, just trying to get back to that dorm. So I knew that I didn't know, you know? But Pratt was just like a wide open thing and I remember the campus being just his haven. You know, walking across the campus and, because it is a lovely setting with the sculptures and everything, it was like that then. And I remember the canon, but it was just a gathering place, and that's when I first came to Pratt, everything was brand new. You know, you're thrown away from home and for me, off military bases. It was just being in the big city and meeting all these new exciting people. And people would just gather around the commons on the grass and that's where you met people. That's how I found out about the Black Student Union because I had met some people sitting out on the grass to come to this.

Heather: About what year? Just generalizing.

Patricia: 1968. I was 17, about to turn 18 and it was just an eye opening experience. Because you know I had just not been exposed to what I realize now, not much of anything. Living on an army base, you're very, very, very sequestered you know? Everything is covered, everything is safe, you're just not out, in the world at all.

Heather: And how did you choose your major?

Patricia: Well, see there's the thing. I knew that I wanted to do, at the time, I was hell bent on doing fashion illustration. When I got to Pratt I realized, first thing they gave it away. When I first tried to do fashion illustration, they didn't have a specific fashion illustration course and Pratt, and I checked into FIT. The FIT requirement was you had to wear white gloves when you

went on field trips, and I thought well I don't think I can do that. And so I thought I'll do illustration at Pratt, and it won't be exactly fashion illustration, but they had fashion. So I came and majored in fashion, but you had to sew. And it was a lot of sewing and I didn't like sewing. So that was a problem. And you had to do things like figure out the physical properties of different fabrics and what temperatures they burned and how many thread counts and things like that. And so I knew that wasn't going to work out but the drawing courses were really appealing and so my freshman year you take a little bit of everything. And it was really a nice smorgasboard that made me realize that oh I think I want to go to illustration rather than fashion, cause fashion, I couldn't sew, I wasn't going to wear white gloves, you know. I thought perhaps this is not my field. But I was determined that I was going to work in art in some kind of a way and that first year was so, there was so much exposure to so many types of things with that program, with that freshman program. But then the revolution started. Frankly, after that first year at Pratt I dropped out because I was going to become a revolutionary. Yes, well I went one year to Pratt then I dropped out to join the revolution, the revolution of going to my parents house in Massachusetts and work there for a year. My dad got me a job and I worked for year. Then I convinced my father that I wanted to go to France and study art and he paid for me to go to Berlitz and study French. And you know, any time after I even tried to count to ten in French my father would grimace because it just didn't work, you know? But after a year not starting a revolution and, you know, realizing I didn't want to work in a government job in Boston I went to Spellman, my father enrolled me without telling me, at Spellman in Atlanta. And he got me an apartment, so I went down there and the art department was on the 5th floor of a building where the elevator stopped at 4. And nobody knew it was up there. And I thought well this is not really art. And I transferred the next year to the Atlanta School of Art, which was like a mini Pratt. And everybody kept saying, the professors kept saying, "You went to Pratt? Well you can just work on your own." But that was not what I came for, and also I was a freshman for the third time. And I thought if I'm ever going to be a sophomore I have to go back to Pratt. So I transferred back to Pratt and they made me a junior. So I never found out what happens sophomore year, because I was a freshman three times. And so, I got back and I was a junior and I was older than the other people in my class but I was glad to be back and to be in art, you know? And to actually focus on illustration. And so I was back in Com-D. And that was fabulous, so I stayed back and graduated there.

Heather: Wow. So, when you came back, what was happening on the campus with the Black Student Union, you know, the revolution on campus?

Patricia: The revolution started in '68. You know it really, I thought the world was going to change. I really did believe, this is it. You know, Kent State had happened, the war was going on and I thought we were really going to make a difference. And it felt like the passion that everyone had was very, was focused externally on making the world better. It was just such a vivid and vibrant time because everyone cared about making things better. So we had our revolution on campus and when I left I felt like "Yes, we're going to continue the revolution, take it world wide" you know that kind of thing. I thought I'm going to go to France and we're you know, whatever. And even while I was gone I kept in touch with people and I had realized that

we had, because in '68 when we had, we locked up the campus you know, we were really going to change things and we had our meeting with the president, we had our list of non negotiable demands, so I really thought things were going to change. I think first thing to alert me that things were not what we thought was when I sat down to negotiate the non negotiable demands. And I'm thinking that these were non negotiable, so the whole revolution had started then and I really thought that it was going to, it made some changes. We made some changes, I mean what we wanted was black and latino faculty, there was a whole bulleted list of things that students were demanding and we were working with the SDS and with the citywide BSU, Black Student Union so around, you know. So there was change. But what ended happening, what I heard about when I got down to Atlanta was the Black Student Union had been given like a large pot of money to write proposals and then it just kind of devolved into what, write proposals? You know? Actually sit down and get some structure. So you know, we got some structure down but it kind of diffused everything and I think that was on the part of administration, they knew what they were doing the minute they turned it into work and paperwork and writing and doctrine. You know? A lot of the excitement was gone, a lot of the energy was gone. But I think things came out of it nevertheless but when I came back it was just a different, it was a different mood you know when I got back. And I think across the country it was a different mood because when I came back, there wasn't that kind of fervor that I remember when I came back at all.

Heather: So that would've been around '71.

Patricia: Yea, I came back in '72 or '73. Because I spent a year, then two years being a freshman at other places, yea.

Heather: It's interesting because when we talked to Larry he mentioned in '72... So there was '68 when the campus was locked, when the gates were locked. Did you participate in that?

Patricia: Oh yea, locked down the gates.

Heather: Could you talk about your memory, you know what you remember from that?

Patricia: What I remember was, first of all everybody wore, we got all of our clothes from Army-Navy stores. Everything was Army and Navy supplies you know what I mean? So we had military jackets and bellbottoms and we were very very dedicated and serious. But what I remember was we were supposed to be patrolling the gates, I was on patrol on one of the gates. I was on the gate on Hall Street, just to make sure they stayed kind of locked, we were going to shut down the school. What I remember was this guy trying to burn the lock off. He had his little pocket lighter and he was trying to burn off these locks, and he was like one of these sanitation guys. I was like, "What are you doing? We're having a revolution." And he said, "I have to get my trash cans out." I said "Not today!" You know... for the most part people were pretty united. There were some students that were pretty angry about it, we were trying to, you know I think our methodology was of course, not well thought out as it could've been. But we

were trying to change things. We were trying to bring kids onto campus, kids from the neighborhood at the time. I felt like, most of us felt like Pratt was like this ivory tower in the middle of a black neighborhood and ignoring the neighbors. We brought kids onto campus to eat at the pie shop. Things like that we considered to be healthy and good change and revolutionary. And we were pretty disruptive, you know? So to bring kids onto the campus to have lunch, to storm into the cafeteria and demand that they be fed, that kind of thing. We had, the engineering students were working with us because they would set off stink bombs and noise bombs, it didn't do any damage in the engineering building and stuff like that. It was just disruptive sort of stuff to say you must pay attention to these demands. And I think I remember SDS painted the canon. The canon seemed to be a big issue, it got painted periodically you know to represent different things. But we were working, the lovely part was the unity. You know the feeling that we are going to make some changes. Because especially with the SDS on campus, and working with the citywide BSU there was a nice feeling of we're all in this together.

Heather: And Larry mentioned that many of the people involved in BSU were women. He was that a lot were in fashion?

Patricia: Yea. I mean there wasn't that distinction. It's interesting, I don't remember there being that distinction being you can't do this because you're female, you know what I'm saying? It wasn't at all about that, it was about brother and sister. That was the attitude. And it was a really interesting thing, particularly coming from all the background that I had. Which was so multicultural and so secluded, you know what I mean? I grew up overseas partially, in Asia and Europe. And so being around all these people that had this fervor, it was really exciting but it also felt like, meaningful. Like, we really did believe in everything we were doing. There was nothing casual about it, you know? Everyone was really dedicated to seeing some changes. And you could not help but notice that this is an ivory tower in the middle of this neighborhood. And it was like living next door to someone and not noticing the conditions their houses were in, or what condition they were in. Do you know what I mean? It was just too overt to be on that campus where not, rich, but well to do, you know, at least middle-class students were coming in from all over the country and just ignoring the neighborhood. Which was, it was too provocative of a situation I think.

Heather: And do you know, how did you all make decisions on what to do? Did you have a lot of meetings? What was the...?

Patricia: We had meetings at the BSU. Horrace Williams was involved, and I remember Aaron Crawford was involved. But I think Horrace was the president at some point. So we had regular meetings, and ad hoc meetings when they were necessary to plan things. So things were all planned and even when they had lockdown of the campus, everyone was delegated a position, everyone knew what they were supposed to do. And I was, I remember Horrace stepping in because when the police came, I remember one of them was swinging a baton. And either he had hit my friend Mary or was about to hit my friend Mary and Horrace had jumped in. Several

people had gotten arrested. And we all went as a group to court, you know when they were arrested, when they were brought out. It was a very unified movement. We had meetings all the time, in the dorms on the campus, different places.

Heather: And were you going to school at the same time or were classes kind of not happening?

Patricia: We were going to classes but it would be like, it could be called, there could be a reason not to go. I remember having some, there was some solidarity day in which everybody was not going to classes to make a point. But instead of going to classes we were sitting in the pie shop you know playing cards. So this is not how you do the revolution, you don't play cards. But the point was being made that we were cutting class. And now that I teach, I find that to be kind of funny because I had a girl at one time who was cutting class and when I had to go outside to go to the office for some reason, I opened the door to the classroom and she was standing outside in the hall. And I was like, "This is not how you cut." You don't cut outside the classroom. And I realized that we don't have this day of protest, go sit in the pie shop. But at the same time we had some events like that that we all went to. We would go support things at other universities because they had supported us.

Heather: Could you talk a little bit about some of the other BSU's around New York City?

Patricia: I remember City University was involved, maybe NYU. What it was the different BSUs at different universities we had called upon them. Because the black student population at Pratt wasn't huge, you know. But yet when we had meetings, I remember one meeting we had at Higgins Hall, not Higgins Hall, in North Hall. And people from all over the city came to that and it looked like this massive presence on campus, but it was students from other universities. You know, but I'm not sure, I think Horrace coordinated that, I'm not sure who was coordinating that. But they would show if we needed them. Like if you needed a show of manpower, to man the gates and things like that, they were doing that. Because we just didn't have that large of a population, and it was a lot of the women from fashion frankly. I do remember a lot of us were in there and the engineers, the engineering students were involved.

Heather: So what I was going to say was, what Larry mentioned '72 there was also another protest.

Patricia: Well I wasn't there.

Heather: Oh, okay. You hadn't come back yet.

Patricia: I came back I think, the end of '72 or the beginning of '73. I graduated in '74.

Heather: Well I see. Because he said that was a different president and that's when I guess Horrace Williams became, was hired officially at Pratt to be the community outreach, I don't know the official title. Do you remember when you came back that was happening or was..?

Patricia: I graduated in '74. So I must've come back, in the middle of or the end of '72. And when I came back I remember checking in to find out what was going on. I remember there was a proposal and there had been a fire in which hall is that? The one that's right on Willoughby... they had been holed up in there, they had taken over the building. So that was the tailend of it, I think. They had taken over the building and there had been a fire, I remember they got a proposal together. I remember I saw a bit of the proposal and thought what, this is what it all came down to. But there had been some changes made, there were more faculty. And from what I could see of it, there had been like some splintering in the group in terms of what should be the next step. But I came at the tailend of all that. I know LaVon Leak was there I think when I came back. LaVon was a friend of mine who, she was there when I got back. I didn't know her, she wasn't there when I started but she was involved. Vicky Golson and Connie Harrold, I know they were all involved.

Heather: Are they still alive?

Patricia: Connie and LaVon are. I don't think Vicky is, I could get in touch with Connie and LaVon.

Heather: That would be great. Were they also in Com-D?

Patricia: I think LaVon was a painting major and Connie I believe was in com-d, I'm not positive.

Heather: That would be great.

Patricia: Gail (???) she was involved. Well it was Gail Harris at the time, and I think she was in fashion. But I could find their information and send it to you.

Heather: That would be wonderful, that would be great. So what was it like graduating? When you came back were you still active or were you more focused on...

Patricia: It was very different when I came back. When I came back, what I perceived was that movement had sort of petered out a bit. Either people had, we got a bit of what we wanted and they split into factions, people weren't speaking to each other. And I thought they had dividied people a bit. I think that was partially, not a ploy but it was understood that it might have that effect, you know what I mean? Go take this money and go write a proposal. Then it became a squabble over how to spend the money and who gets what and I was like what? That was not the point, but like I said it was still different in the sense that there was more black and latino faculty. So that part had changed. But in terms of coming back I just remember coming back to factions and there were people that were not speaking anymore. And it was something to do

with, and this is something that LaVon and Connie, and maybe even Gail would know about, it had something to do with whatever happened. Not North Hall... what is the red brick building?

Heather: The small one?

Patricia: DeKalb? Yea DeKalb Hall. And there had been like, they had taken over the building or taken over the floor of a building or something like that. And there had been some mattress fire or something. It's not like anyone was hurt, but there was a division that happened up in there. When I came back I was friends with both sides, people on both sides but I realized they weren't speaking to each other. You know. So what that rift was about, I think that rift was about getting that proposal together. I don't know if it was about issues so much as it was about dividing up the money and deciding who gets to write the proposal, to decide what's important. I don't remember exactly what the issues were, but there was definitely a rift. In terms of the mood on campus, it seemed like it was just back to normal. You know, it seemed like everybody was just going to classes and trying to get their, you know... to graduate.

Heather: Right, right. Larry mentioned that one of the things that came out of that proposal, at least at that time, that there were organized activities for young people on campus.

Patricia: Mhmm. That's true.

Heather: Do you remember any of that? He said that came during the summer, they had a summer program.

Patricia: Right. I remember that that was, I didn't connect that exactly to that movement, you know, but yea I remember they had art programs where they brought kids on to campus in the summertime. I thought that was fabulous, I don't know is that still going on, you know?

Heather: Well there are, but not to the degree that Larry described. The numbers, the scale of it seemed so much larger. And it was supported, it seemed like it had a lot of support. But I think that it had government, federal dollars. You know because they were giving money for those sorts of things in those days. That's my impression.

Patricia. The **Hyup** program, that was part of it.

Heather: So, when you graduated what did you go on to do?

Patricia: Well graduation was, we had Mr. Fuller was the speaker. And you know, I wasn't impressed then, I was impressed retroactively when I realized that was Mr. Fuller. Graduation was a shock to me because I remember getting my diploma and it was like go straight to the bursars office, you know to sign the promise for your student loan and everything. I remember handing it to my father and saying "Here dad." And he handed it back, and said something like today my son, you are a man. And I remember thinking "What?" I could hear the umbilical

cord snap, like what I'm on my own dad? But I wanted to go into children's books and I spoke to faculty members. I remember I had Charles Goslin and I thought the sun had rose and set on him because he was exquisite as a designer. And he had told me that I could not pursue illustration, I had to stick to graphic design. He said, "You're not an illustrator stick with graphic design." It had broken my heart for like a year. I had thought, oh I had always wanted to do that. I just thought that Charles Goslin said I can't illustrate. And so I talked to a bunch of teachers about going into children's books because I had been freelancing when I came back to Pratt and I was older than the other students, I was at least two years older than my classmates. Everyone seemed extremely young to me when I came back, you know? And just a little bit naive and I started freelancing and was freelancing for theater companies and stuff like that so by the time I graduated I had enough clients to just keep on working, you know? And I had been getting a lot of children's theater in my portfolio so I wanted to do children's books. When I graduated and talked to different (dog interrupts.) When I realized that was what I wanted to do and everyone was being very negative about it, I'm very thankful now that I was in my 20s and didn't hear that, you know you just don't hear no. What Goslin said was crushing, and it took about a year before I realized "You know, I don't care what he says, that's what I want to do," you know? And I went to see everyone in town and I started getting, I got my first children's book and so that was just the thing that I was doing on the side and I kept doing freelance illustration and some graphic design, I did do some graphic design. But I was doing so much illustration and graphic design, that it wasn't that hard to make a living. Because back in the day, you know apartments weren't \$4,00 for a studio so it wasn't impossible. It was easy to get a lot of work, and what I found to do was a lot of my friends were freelancing and so it was just, it was an easy path to take. It was only years and years later that I realized what a job meant, having a job. You know a friend of mine, and only as I got older, one of my first friends retired and started talking about rolling out her 401k and I was like "That's why you've been going out every day to a job since you have security like that!" But it wasn't that hard.

Heather: What was the professor's last name?

Patricia: Goslin, G-o-s-l-i-n. His picture used to hang over com-d, he used to be like a rock god. He was really, very wise and an excellent graphic designer. He would do graphic design for the Metropolitan Museum and stuff, he had some huge clients. He had a great eye, a great eye. And the kind of professors that you bring work in and he could put his hand over one part of it and all of the sudden, it worked, and you were like "Oh my goodness why didn't I leave that out?" That kind of thing. So I really respected his opinion and when he said you can't draw I was like *cry* well I wanted to. And I realized that too, in teaching now, I would never say to someone what you can't do, cause you don't know what someone's capable of doing. You know, so you don't want to step on it and crush their dream. But the fact is that the universal attitude of something being too hard, I was surprised to run into that. I was surprised that so many professors said "Well you can't get into children's books, it's too tough of a business." Well somebody's doing it, you know? But that's why I say, you have to be in your 20s or have a certain level of hutzpah to overcome a lot of negative input.

Heather: So, are you part of the Black Alumni of Pratt? Are you, is that how you got involved in the Black Lives Matter lecture?

Patricia: I was a part of that. I wasn't as involved as I would like to be involved, even with the Black Alumni, Dwight Johnson who I think started that and was running it, I've tried to like contribute to it or be part of it when possible. But it hasn't been on a day to day basis.

Heather: Right, and so this is just a thing I've wondered if you were involved or knew about the closing of the engineering school in the 90s, no? Ok.

Patricia: I don't know about how that went down, do you?

Heather: No, not enough. It's one of those, another silenced histories at Pratt.

Patricia: Somebody knows.

Heather: Yes, yes. So just going back now from where we just left off, is there anything else, by the way I just want to say for the record, your memory is really amazing.

Patricia: I don't think I have dates and stuff like that. I just remember having the feelings.

Heather: Exactly, that's what's important, exactly. Um, so just to make sure that the people that you mentioned, you'll get in touch with. Vicky Gulson, Gail Harris LeVone Leak? Well Vicky, maybe not you said that she's not alive, right? But Connie is?

Patricia: Connie's alive, Levon's alive, Gail I'm not sure about. And I know that Vicky, who was very instrumental in that whole thing that went down in, what's that building? Dekalb, I know Connie and Vicky were very involved in that. So Connie will know what happened there.

Heather: Right, okay. That would be great. Do you happen to have any photos or anything that you've saved?

Patricia: I'll have to go looking for them, I'm sure I have something but I'll have to go looking for them because they'll be actual photos not in my computer.

Heather: Well if you don't mind that would be amazing. Did you do any illustrations during that time do you remember?

Patricia: Yea, I remember. I had stuff in the newspaper. I had an entire thing in the newspaper that somebody then copied, somebody at Pratt had traced... but yea I had some ads in the paper and stuff. I was working at the Billie Holiday theatre for little folk that was over at Restoration Corporation. I was coming home from class one time and I had one of those huge portfolios that only students carry, and I was walking down Myrtle Avenue and a man came up in

a car stopped and said, "Are you an artist?" And I said "Yes! I am!" You know, he said I have a job for you and I jumped in his car. This is why my parents didn't want me to come to New York. But he took me to the Billie Holiday theater for little folk and I started doing flyers and posters for them while I was at Pratt. And so I have a bunch of those fliers.

Heather: That would be amazing. And do remember this Drum Magazine?

Patricia: Vaguely, only vaguely.

Heather: Okay and did you contribute anything there or do you don't think so?

Patricia: I don't think so. You know what, I may have but I don't remember. I just vaguely remember them putting it together.

Heather. Uh-huh. Okay well whatever you have if you're willing to copy and share or we can help you, whatever it would be amazing.

Patricia: I'll look for it. But why don't I come sit in on a class sometime when you guys do it, that sounds like a fascinating course.

Heather: Well we would like to invite you. I do have, you know we're teaching everything online as you know. You probably are too. So we are having... well I'm thinking we do have final presentations in May, beginning of May... May 6th. It would be at this time on Wednesday morning, I don't...

Patricia: I have class on Wednesday, I have my final presentations too.

Heather: But yes, we would love to have you. It runs in the spring, it'll run again next spring so we'll definitely invite you. But we will share with you our digital final version of whatever comes out of the course.

Patricia: How was it you got interested in this?

Heather: Well we both have different reasons but I think for me I'm actually, my earlier scholarly work was on the history of education, partially in BedStuy in the 60s and 70s. Because in the public schools, as you probably know, there was a lot going on at that time. The community control struggle, there was a school strike, schools were closed down... it was a big, major event in the history of schools in New York City, and in the history of the Civil Rights Movement in New York City. So I had done that research before I came to Pratt and interviewed a lot of people involved in that way and then at Pratt I started, it just over time I thought well no one's really done much work on the history of Pratt. And particularly my interest was activism and education, right? Student activism, teacher activism whatever form... whatever's active. And so that's eventually how I got to it, trying to figure out, more about Pratt itself. And the archives

at Pratt, there's wonderful archival material for the early period of Pratt. Just amazing, actually to look at.

Patricia: I've seen some.

Hether: And I started bringing one of my classes there to the archives and realizing "Oh my god there's so much here." But then realizing there's not much about the 60s.

Patricia: The 60s just disappeared. Hello? I'm there. And the thing to me, it's not heart breaking but kind of telling, is when I came back and started teaching I had so many students who have no idea what Kent State was even about. Don't even know. You know, I saw a documentary and it broke my heart, there was a teacher at Kent State who said kids don't know what happened here and they go to Kent State. He said if you call, there's a tanning salon in town, he said they can call a whole list of students at 3 in the morning if they have a space open and the kids will come running down to get a tan, but he said they had no idea what happened, what the history is. What they're worried about getting a tan, getting a BMW... it's just like, what was that all about you know? It's interesting how history just paves over things. You know, I'm fascinated by it. I did, last year I did my first middle grade novel. And I put history in it, not put history in it, but I really wanted to dig into history and trying to share with kids that that is not, to me not totally the past, you know what I mean? It's these people thought they were modern, the people back there. I had a student come into class and say "We're studying you." And I'm like what are you talking about because there was some billboard up at Pratt about the 60s and 70s and I'm like what are you talking about? But the people back then were, this was cutting edge, everything was cutting edge. I remember when the internet came out, and one of my teachers at Pratt said, "There's this thing, and it's going to help kids do homework over their computer, over the phone." And I said "What are you talking about?" And he was telling me about the internet, this was back in the 70s, it's coming. And I was like "That's a crazy teacher."

Heather: Well, if you can find a photo of yourself in your combat gear, that would be amazing.

Patricia: I will go looking for this, my revolutionary period. It was required your bell bottoms be frayed at the bottom. If they weren't frayed, you weren't really serious. Will do.

Heather: Rebecca do you have anything to add here?

Rebecca: Thank you so much, you're fascinating. I agree with Heather that your memory is better than you said, it's so funny.

Patricia: You're very kind. My mother always says, "It's just because there's all these things that you need to make room for that you're forgetting stuff you know? Shoveling them out and getting new stuff in."