
INTERVIEW WITH KARYN AGUIRRE, CLASS OF 1986

Emily Deppermann 00:01

So this is Emily Depperman, Illinois State University graduate student, speaking with Illinois State alum Karyn Aguirre, Class of 1986, on July 13, 2022, for the ISU oral history project. So to start off, Karyn, why did you choose to go to college?

Karyn Aguirre 00:20

[Laughs] I'm sorry for laughing.

Emily Deppermann 00:26

No, it's fine!

Karyn Aguirre 00:26

Well, it was a two-pronged reason. I'll save the silly reason for last. So my mom was an educator, she taught elementary school, and so with my brother and I, she instilled in us the importance of education. Of her five siblings, she was the only one that went to college. She dropped out of college, she went back to college, got the degree, etc., etc. And so, you know, when you grow up having that type of role model, attending college organically is the next step. So ideally, you would think, okay, that's why my brother and I are going, because my mother blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. The other side to the story is during my high school years my mother and I had a very interesting relationship as most mothers and daughters do, so college became the incentive for me to get away from my mother and out of the house.

Emily Deppermann 01:36

Sure!

Karyn Aguirre 01:38

So those two reasons are in tandem. I realized that a college education was important, but also my mother was getting on my nerves. I couldn't stand her and I was like, I got to get up out of here. So college was that avenue to get up out the house.

Emily Deppermann 01:54

Sure. And is that partially why you chose to attend ISU specifically?

Karyn Aguirre 02:00

No. [laughs]

Emily Deppermann 02:01

Oh, okay.

Karyn Aguirre 02:03

She had nothing to do with my choice about ISU. Actually, ISU wasn't even on my radar. My mother attended Clark College, which is a - at the time it was called Clark College, it's called Clark Atlanta University now - but my mother attended Clark College, it's a historically Black college and university - HBCU, I'm sure you've heard that term - based in Atlanta, Georgia. My mother went there and that was where I wanted to go and so I applied, I got in. At Whitney Young, where I attended high school in Chicago, Herman Simon, who worked in [ISU] admissions, would come up and do college fairs and we would always banter and I would always give him a hard time. And so one of the last times he was up, he was like, Are you applying? And I was like, No, I'm going to Clark College. And he was like, Well, just apply. And I said, Well, how much does it cost? And at the time it was free, the application process was free. I was like, Oh, it's free? Okay, I'll apply. And I did and I got accepted, obviously. And so my mother and I, we were sat down filling out the final paperwork for Clark, and my mom said, well, I need you to understand - because my brother was at Northwestern - and she was like, I need you to understand you can only come home twice: Christmas and the end of the school year. And so I said, Well, what am I supposed to do for Thanksgiving? And she said, Oh, you'll meet somebody, and you'll go to - and I was like, A stranger's house? For Thanksgiving? I went, [negative noise]. I never said a word to her but from that moment I was like, I am not going there. The other college I applied to was DePaul. I only applied to three because remember now, I'm going to Clark. I picked up the phone and I called Illinois State because I never turned down the acceptance, and I was like, What do I need to do to finalize my admission? And that is how I wound up at Illinois State.

Emily Deppermann 04:03

Wow, that is quite the interesting story.

Karyn Aguirre 04:06

And I tell the story, you know, especially when we go to different things and kids are trying to figure it out, and I tell them, Illinois State wasn't my number one choice at all but it wound up being the best choice, you know, because everything worked out in the end.

Emily Deppermann 04:26

Sure. And so what was your major at ISU?

Karyn Aguirre 04:31

Communication. Mass communication with a public relations minor. And so because I have a PR minor I don't have a Bachelors of Arts, I have a Bachelors of Science.

Emily Deppermann 04:42

Okay. And why did you choose that major?

Karyn Aguirre 04:52

So the interesting thing was it was two things. I was interested in law and I was interested in media, it was something about television reporting. And my brother was also interested in journalism - and not that I looked up to him or anything because it wasn't that kind of situation - but it's like, when you have the people around you and the things that they're interested in, you go and you explore them and then you're either like, oh, yeah, that's me, or no, that's not me. And so I was on this thing of, I wanted to be a reporter but I also was like, but if I go to law school, I can do media law. So I was like, I could do both. So that's why I went into it, and then when I was talking to, I don't even remember who those counselor people were at Illinois State, but when I was talking to them about a minor and some of the things that I was interested in, whoever the person was at the time recommended the PR minor. And so I was like, okay, whatever, not even really understanding what public relations was until I delved into it. So that's how the minor came along.

Emily Deppermann 06:14

Sure. And so were you also part of any student organizations at ISU?

Karyn Aguirre 06:22

So I was a part of the Black Student Union, I was a part of the NAACP, I was a part of the National Panhellenic Council, and then my freshman year I became a member of the Theta Delta chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Incorporated.

Emily Deppermann 06:41

So when you think of those organizations, what are some - do you have any specific memories from them when you were a student?

Karyn Aguirre 06:49

I think what's important when you go to a predominantly white institution, those particular organizations strengthen your purpose as a minority on a campus, they give you a sense of connectedness, you know, and family. And when - I mean, because the harsh reality of it is, and even today, is you need to be able to have that support when you need to project your voice for whatever it may be. And so what was great about the Black Student Union was it was for everybody. So like when you join a sorority, and NPHC was attached to Delta, so that is exclusive, because you have to belong, but the Black Student Union and the NAACP, they were for all students. And so that's what was great about being a part of those particular organizations. And I did - it wasn't an organization, but Muriel Orendorf at the time, who worked for Student Life, convinced me my senior year to join the Homecoming Committee because it was like, if you want them to do things for Black students, you got to get involved. And so she was like, Get on the Homecoming Committee, and I might have been the only Black person on the committee at the time. I don't remember, but I let her convince me to do it, so I did it.

Emily Deppermann 08:37

Sure. Did you have - did you work at all when you were a student?

Karyn Aguirre 08:43

At the Alamo.

Emily Deppermann 08:45

Oh, nice. So what did a typical day look like for you at ISU?

Karyn Aguirre 08:54

Um, well, every year was different. And so I want to say every year I took a night class, and I love night classes, but a lot of people didn't. But I did, I mean, because it was one and done, and you were done. So like I said each year was different, but I learned early, like, my freshman year, that first semester, I had like a eight o'clock class Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and then I didn't have another class to noon. I didn't do that again. So but yeah, I mean, every day was different. It just depended on what your class schedule was, you know, what was going on. I know I got kind of - what was kind of funny to me was because I stayed in Watterson my freshman and my sophomore year and Watterson had a rec room, which is no longer there, it's where the food court and all that is, and they had parties in the rec room on Wednesday, and I was like, What, Wednesday? A party on a Wednesday?, you know, so I was definitely my freshman year on the party scene, but doing what I was supposed to do. So yeah, I mean, every day looked different, you know. At the end of the day it was a matter of going to class most of the time, you know, and trying to get into the social and community fiber of school. So yeah, that's what I did. I don't, I can't say I had a routine. Yeah.

Emily Deppermann 10:31

Sure, that is no problem. So when you think of ISU or when you visit campus, what are some, like, specific memories that come to mind for you?

Karyn Aguirre 10:46

So one of the biggest things that I do when it comes to the campus is - so much of what was there when I was there is no longer there, so what we always do when we come into the campus is we take ourselves down memory lane. It's like, remember that was here, and remember that was here, and remember we used to do this, and the CVS used to be that, and Garcia's was here, and [inaudible] was here, and so that's like one of the first things that I do. I think what they have done to the campus is amazing but I also think some of the stuff that's no longer there has taken away from some of the small college town feel because now when you come to the campus, even though it's still a college, it's not, you know - because it has definitely shifted to more commercial, commercialized if that's a word.

(11:53) So - and then because I lived in Watterson and, you know, it's the tallest dorm, whatever, whatever, so you always got to go back Watterson. Because I worked at the Alamo, I always go back to the Alamo. I actually introduced myself to the manager a few years ago and he still gives me my employee discount but I think they do it for all former employees. So I think it's more kind of back to the campus and just reminisce and then, you know, we talking, shoot, well - I've been a Delta for over 40 years, and I would think for a lot of us who it's been that long, that's what we do. We come back and we reminisce.

Emily Deppermann 12:40

Right. What are some of the things that you've missed that used to be on campus that aren't here anymore?

Karyn Aguirre 12:48

Garcia's Pizza [laughs]. They not gonna get rid of Avanti, so - I forgot - always I go to Avanti's and get bread. I mean, and I know it's like Avanti's is a staple at the campus, I forget about that. I would just say some of the things that may - like I said, Garcia's was a great place for us to go eat. I think the hotels, like all of the things that were where the hotels were, for whatever they may be, made downtown Normal feel more like a home. The way it is now, like I say, it's commercialized, you know, there's a hotel here, there's a hotel there, you know, it's not - so I would say what I just miss is more - it doesn't have the same campus feel that it had when I was there. Yeah, anything and everything that kind of made it still have that campus feel is what I miss.

Emily Deppermann 14:08

Absolutely. Do you remember any big events that happened on campus when you were student?

Karyn Aguirre 14:16

Like, be more specific.

Emily Deppermann 14:19

I guess like anything, like, historical. Just like anything big that happened, like with students at the time.

Karyn Aguirre 14:29

So one of the biggest things that happened was there was a - I'm going to have to Google it so I can make sure that I say it correctly, but it was - the students were protesting for - were they were doing a keg limitation ban? I can't remember.

Emily Deppermann 14:55

Are you thinking about the beer riots?

Karyn Aguirre 14:59

Yes. The beer riot. And we were all like, what is going on? And I think when you, you know, you come away to school and you just don't expect something like that to happen. We all just kind of stayed put. That was a really, really huge event. Another event, it didn't necessarily happen on the campus, but my freshman year a person that I knew, he killed his girlfriend and it kind of took all of us by surprise. To this day we really don't know what happened. Most of us think it was an accident. We don't think it was intentional, but he bypassed, he pled to one of the manslaughters, I can't remember. But for the Black community on campus, it took all of us - because it happened during the Thanksgiving weekend. And so we had to come back to the campus and try to take finals and stuff like that, and knowing both of the individuals and you know, you just take yourself through how could something like this happen? So that happened while I was there.

(16:30) And then the other thing that happened while I was there, which actually I was a part of - so the Black Student Union, the vice president was stepping down. I remember the guy's name - but there was a white guy, Steve Bedingfield, who was going to run for vice president. And the majority of us that were involved in the Black Student Union just didn't feel that when there were so many eligible Black candidates that we should allow it. And so I let them convince me [laughs] to run and because of that, it just took a whole other turn, like - and that's why I was like - I wanted to pull it out, because in the Vidette it was "White skin caused rejection," that was an editorial. "Bedingfield's nomination nixed." I had to send something in because they were asking, you know, what were my qualifications, and so I became - and that happened in November of '84, so you can do some research through the Vidette archive - and so I became a part of this, like, controversy that I wasn't even trying to become a controversy of, and so I had to send something in and it was in the November 28th, 1984 [Vidette], it's like, "Aguirre offers own qualifications" and so I sent it in. But here's the interesting thing is - so let me take the blur off, so just showing you the hidden racism as we're gonna call it. So where is the first? Okay, so this was November

21 and as you see, it says - the editorial is right up at the top and it says, "White skin caused rejection," right. So here's the editorial page and they put my [letter to the editor] all the way hidden down here.

Emily Deppermann 19:13

Yeah.

Karyn Aguirre 19:14

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative]. And I know - I've kept these all this time. So yeah, it was an interesting time because I got attacked in the newspaper. And it just wasn't the time for it, you know, it's like, it's the Black Student Union, we're on a predominantly white campus, and so no, the vice president should not have been a white man. It should have been a Black individual that was qualified. So yeah, so that was in '84.

Emily Deppermann 20:03

Wow, so how did that end, like, did anything happen after the Vidette articles or - ?

Karyn Aguirre 20:11

Mm-mmh [negative]. I had won when I sent in - because there was another one, "Bedingfield's nomination nixed" and it was like, "After a five to five vote the BSU Executive Board decided to ask Bedingfield to step down so that new nominations could be considered." They spelled my name wrong on this one. And then they - and it just said, "Members said they felt there were other nominees who are more qualified, dedicated and active in BSU's activities." So yeah, and then I was elected.

Emily Deppermann 20:48

Wow.

Karyn Aguirre 20:56

And the president at the time, Phillip - I don't even know where he wound up going, but he was supporting Steve to be the vice president and yeah, so mm-mmh [negative], no.

Emily Deppermann 21:10

Wow. Yeah, that is quite the story.

Karyn Aguirre 21:13

Oh, I share it with people every now and then. But through all my different moves, you know, it's just really, really interesting what survived and what didn't.

Emily Deppermann 21:25

Sure.

Karyn Aguirre 21:26

So, yep. So these things survived.

Emily Deppermann 21:31

So when you were a student, who were some meaningful people in your life that you met on campus?

Karyn Aguirre 21:42

Muriel Orendorf, Herman Simon, Jay Groves, and Lucille Holcomb.

Emily Deppermann 21:51

Do you still talk with any of them?

Karyn Aguirre 21:53

So Herman and Lucille are deceased and Jay and Muriel, yes, I still speak with them. Muriel I speak with a little bit more now than Jay because Jay is retired, you know, and Jay is living the retired life. But yeah, so those four individuals were definitely - Herman Simon is the reason that I came to ISU and so I kept in touch with him. The whole time I was there - it's kind of funny because I was trying to set him up with my mom and he didn't know how to tell me he was gay, so it finally came out - I'm cracking up - because I was trying to set him up with my mom, so that was fun. And he was so gracious about it and I didn't find out until after I left the campus that he was gay, and I was like, he could have told me instead of waiting all that time. But I met Muriel through him and she wrote my letter for me to be a member of Delta and we have kept in touch through the years. And then Lucille Holcomb, I don't know, she just saw something in me. And the crazy part about it was her brother is like my play uncle so it's just crazy, those degrees of separation. But she saw something in me and because she saw something in me, she actually nominated me for Who's Who Among University - College? - Students, whatever that thing is. And so I'm in the 86th edition because of her.

Emily Deppermann 23:37

Wow, that's awesome. So what steps did you take following graduation?

Karyn Aguirre 23:45

In terms of trying to find a job and stuff?

Emily Deppermann 23:47

Mm-hmm [affirmative]!

Karyn Aguirre 23:48

Well, so Jay Groves wanted me to delay graduation because he saw something in me. So he wanted me to delay graduation and do an internship in Peoria and it wasn't a paid internship and I was like, Jay, there is no way I can afford that but I promise you I'll go to graduate school. So I did enroll in graduate school, but then my mom had a aneurysm so I wound up dropping out - well, not dropping out, I withdrew from graduate school so that I could take care of my mom [inaudible]. And then that's when I just kind of went on some soul searching. I worked at MCI - a friend of mine worked at MCI, got me a job there. And I will say that I kind of decided, like, my senior year that I didn't think I wanted to really do [broadcast journalism] on the camera side of it, because the - and its still that today, the industry is very, very cutthroat. Opportunities for minorities are definitely more prevalent now, but it's just a very cutthroat industry and that's just not my personality. So, I started working for MCI - I had a communications degree, they were a telecommunications company, but I always kind of sort of wanted to go to law school, so then I left there and worked at State Attorney's Office for 11 years. But after about two, three years realized law - [negative noise], that wasn't for me. So eventually, I'm doing my passion, I'm a social worker. So yeah, just - I went on a journey of trying to figure it out [laughs]. Do a little bit of this, do a little bit - so that's what I did, yeah.

Emily Deppermann 25:52

Absolutely. So how and why have you stayed involved with ISU as an alum?

Karyn Aguirre 26:03

I can answer that with two people. Reggie Summerrise and Julie Jones. So Reggie was at Illinois State with me and we became friends. He and I were pledging at the same time and that's how we met. Like, again, there's a Greek community, it's very - the Black Greek community at the time when I was at Illinois State, we were a very close-knit community. So Reggie and I became friends. He's dated some friends of mine, married a friend of mine, just our lives have just been intersected and we continue to be friends to this day even though him and my friend are no longer married, but that's another story for another day.

(26:47) And then Julie, who is on the Board of Trustees and former chairman, her and I are in the same sorority and she came through the same chapter at Illinois State. And so they, Reggie and a couple of other people, had been trying to get me to come back to Homecoming, come back to Homecoming. And so in 2007 I came back. Some stuff they was doing, I was like, that don't make no sense, whatever. So I

came back in 2008 and Reggie was like, Karyn, come to the scholarship banquet and I was like, Okay. And I came and I saw the purpose, I saw what they were trying to do for Black students and he was like, Get involved. And I said, I am. And he was about to run for president and so I wanted to support him because again, he was a good friend of mine. So I wanted to support him in that and so then it became the spiral effect. I wanted to be over scholarship. Reggie told me no, which I ain't like but whatever, and so then they came back and asked me to do Homecoming. And then they came back next year, asked us to it again, then they - Julie was like - no, they sent me an email saying, You're on the Homecoming Committee. So I came to the meeting and Julie and Reggie had decided to put me on the Homecoming Committee. Then the next year they decided I was going to be the chair and then they just started voluntelling me [inaudible]. But from it, because I saw the purpose and because of the skill set I felt that I brought to the table, I was like, Oh, they need my help [laughs]. And these were my people, you know what I'm saying? I was like, they need my help. But I saw the purpose.

(28:49) And then the other thing was, coming - so I would come back every year for my sorority's founding celebration, but that was just us. Becoming a Homecoming - it was like, I was seeing people that were there during my journey, able to reconnect with some of the people that I was really, really close with at that time, and then I was meeting new people too, that have become, you know, good friends of mine. And so those are the things that kept me involved, engaged - the connectedness, the purpose behind it, and me seeing the value in it, right? Because even though there's a purpose you have to see the value in it. And I have a philanthropic spirit, it's is just who I am. So yeah, that's why I have been heavily involved since, like, 2008. That's a long time, that's 14 years. That's a long time!

Emily Deppermann 29:53

It is!

Karyn Aguirre 29:55

What was I thinking?

Emily Deppermann 29:59

Certainly kept you busy. If there's one thing you could change about your experience at ISU, is there anything you would?

Karyn Aguirre 30:08

I don't necessarily think this is germane to Black students, but I can only speak as a Black student at Illinois State. I don't think that they support you enough in navigating picking classes. Like, I can't even tell you - I can tell you my high school counselor's name, I can't tell you anybody's name at Illinois State that helped me figure out what I'm supposed to do, and so I think that piece of it needed to be better. The other part of it, and it still exists today, is who's that space for you, when you don't feel justified by a teacher. And this is a apple and orange kind of scenario, but I remember - can I remember this teacher's

name? But it was one of my PR classes, and in that minor as well - because it's a major now, but it was a minor then - there are very few that look like me. And so the one little group - I can't stand group projects and I think all universities need to find a better way to grade group projects, but anyway, I was the only Black girl in this group and when we were meeting, all of the ideas that I came up with they didn't like. A couple of times, one of the girls was living in a sorority house, we had to go meet in the sorority house. So it was such a bad experience for me and all of them lied on me and said I didn't hold my weight, I didn't do this, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. I went to the professor, he heard me out, and what he said to me was if I aced the final - because based on what they did I had an F now in the class - so he said if I aced the final he would give me a C. And I did get a C.

(31:17) But if I had had somebody in my ear and/or thinking - I'm not gonna say that I wasn't satisfied with his answer, but in hindsight, now that I'm older and wiser, I should have went above his head. Because that shouldn't have been enough, right? Because it's like, I'm telling you that they're lying, and I get it's four of them, but in hindsight he should have called us all in. Right? So I did not suggest this. Didn't y'all turn that down? Didn't I this? Didn't I - didn't y'all treat - ? You know, but they got to him before I did, know what I'm saying? So I think all of those conversations need to be had with students, is that if you don't feel justified in a grade, there's a process. And I don't even know if that process exists because that was never communicated to me, you know. I was too busy powering to the people on other levels and not trying to navigate some people who I felt were being racist towards me, even though that was the situation. So, yes, I can honestly say I don't think anybody cared enough to make sure that those kinds of things were handled for students, so - and I'm sure if I talked to some people it's still the case today.

Emily Deppermann 33:55

Sure. Well, that is all of my questions. Is there anything else that you would like to speak about that I didn't ask about?

Karyn Aguirre 34:22

The only thing that I would say is that I do think that Illinois State is moving in the right direction to address the diversity, the equity, the inclusion, okay, and here's where I come and I get frank. I am all about DEI, ID - however they're saying it now - but one of the biggest problems I have is, as Black students on a campus - and this is nationwide - our needs truly haven't been met yet and now that diversity, equity and inclusion is so huge we're getting shuffled in with the LGBTQA community, we're getting shuffled in with women rights, with Latino rights. So all of the non-white, who feel that they need to have equity, we're getting lumped into that. But we haven't won our fight, and being lumped in we're not going to win our fight, because now what's gonna happen? And I'm probably one of most liberal people you will meet, but this is my truth. So now what's going to happen is that gay rights, Latino rights, women rights, and what other minorities want to join? We're all - but no, no. So that is my struggle, is that I am all about it but I still feel that this group here, this one that we've been brought up from slavery, we have been persecuted from day one, and we're going to continue to be persecuted, is we still need our own, you know, we still

need - I'm gonna support over here all day long but I still feel mine. We need our own because we've been fighting for ever and we still, we still in the fight. So -

Emily Deppermann 36:36

Absolutely.

Karyn Aguirre 36:37

But with all of that said, I will say Illinois State is moving in the right direction, but it's still more actionable. No, that's not how I want to say that. It's still more words actionable but not movement actionable, right?

Emily Deppermann 36:58

Yeah.

Karyn Aguirre 36:59

Yeah. So that's it.

Emily Deppermann 37:02

Yeah, no, I think those are very real concerns. So thank you for speaking with me and sharing your time and your memories and your thoughts. We greatly appreciate it.

Karyn Aguirre 37:14

You are more than welcome.