

Computing Educators Oral History Project

Practice interview transcript

Andrea Lawrence

Interviewer: Elizabeth Adams

Recorded Sunday, June 26, 2005

Location: Lisbon, Portugal

Corresponding audio available on CEOHP's website, ceohp.org, under practice interviews.

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1 [0:00]

2 **Elizabeth Adams: Today is June 26th [2005] and we are interviewing Andrea Lawrence of**
3 **Spelman College. And the interviewer is Elizabeth Adams of James Madison**
4 **University.**

5
6 Andrea Lawrence: My mother was a registrar at Spelman College. She eventually ... she started
7 out as a special assistant to the president and then when he retired he made her registrar. And
8 then she was registrar for a number of years. My father was a teacher and he ended up
9 working with special education in the sense of helping place students in jobs at Emerson
10 Township High [School], which I believe was one of the largest high schools in the country.

11
12 Well, I started out at Spelman College since my mother was there. My grandpa said, "You're
13 going to Spelman." And he{ not understandable }, I think. And I really wanted to go
14 somewhere else, but after I got there I had a great time. Met my future husband. Dropped out
15 and got married my junior year.

16

17 So then was a question of what was I going to do next. When he went to graduate school at
18 Purdue, I decided I would finish my education because my grandmother was nagging me
19 every week. So I did and ... in mathematics, I majored in mathematics. And that was my first
20 exposure to computers. Spelman didn't have any computer science courses at that time. It
21 was the 1960s. But Purdue did. And I don't think they had graduated their first undergraduate
22 class in computer science, but they had math electives that were computer courses. So I did
23 assembly language and FORTRAN and numerical methods and all those things as math
24 electives.

25
26 Then I stayed home and raised kids for like 15 years and it was that, at that point, I decided to
27 go back and get certified to teach in the high school. I did that and taught for a while and I
28 decided to restart my life. I had, I guess, a midlife change. I left my husband, took the kids,
29 went to grad school. And it was sort of ironic because I went to grad school in computer
30 science because I didn't think I remembered how to do good proofs in math. [both laugh]
31 And I knew I knew how to do the programming piece. And also I had done some computer
32 science things while I was doing my certification program. So I was feeling a little more up-
33 to-date on the computer science than I was on the theoretical mathematics. Also the chair of
34 the department said if I wanted to do computer science he'd get me a TA-ship. Since I had no
35 job, it sounded like a good thing. So I went to Atlanta University, got my Master's, worked
36 as a TA at Spelman, and then when I graduated, they hired me. They told me, "You've got to
37 go back to school and get that Ph.D. if you want to stay working here." So ...
38

39 **E: So you did.**

40
41 A: I did.

42
43 **E: Where did you get it?**

44
45 A: I went to Georgia Tech. It was kind of interesting, because there were very few women in the
46 graduate program and there were no minorities. So I was their ... a somewhat double ... a
47 triple minority. I was older than everyone else. I was one of very few women. And I was the
48 ... used to have to say, "I'm having a meeting of the minority club — I'm here."
49

50 **E: [break in recording] I hear that you have experienced some things that others might**
51 **think of as challenges, but you seem to be breezing over them. Are there any things that**
52 **you think of as particular challenges in your life?**

53
54 A: Well, a number of things. One is the way I did it — the in-and-out nature of my schooling.
55 You know, 15 years here, a gap here, and a three-year gap here, and another three- or four-
56 year gap there. Every time I would start over, it was such a challenge to get back into the
57 mode, to balance out the other responsibilities: the children, trying to feed the children, all
58 those kinds of things. So I think my biggest challenges have come from trying to re-enter the
59 so-called pipeline at various points. Almost felt like I had to bore holes in.
60

61 And some of the challenges have come from people's attitude, especially when I first went to
62 Tech. I ran into two different kinds of people. I ran into people who were very supportive and

63 helpful, and some people who assumed that because I had gone to a minority institution for
64 my Master's I didn't know anything. And it was interesting because I did basically two-and-
65 a-half years at Spelman and a year and a summer at Purdue for my undergraduate. And I
66 discovered that if I mentioned that I was a Purdue graduate they treated me completely
67 different, even though ... And I got a little bit of that when I went to Purdue. My advisor
68 decided that I just needed to go back and retake all my math courses. And I said, "Oh, I don't
69 think so." But it's a bit of a challenge because he is so ... it was funny because he pulled out
70 the same textbook that we had used at Spelman, that I had at home. He said, "Well, if you
71 study here you might want to look over this textbook to see what you know, basically."
72

73 **E: Do you think your students at Spelman are experiencing that same bias today?**

74

75 A: Yes, some of them, at some places. Spelman does have a strong record for producing
76 students who go on to achieve the Ph.D., so that has helped. So when they go to schools
77 where they have been before, we don't have that issue. But we do sometimes have an issue
78 with schools who look at only the GRE scores and the fact that it's a minority institution or a
79 small institution. And perceive that the students will not be prepared.
80

81 **E: [another break in recording] You've just pointed out that role models can make a**
82 **difference. Is that part of the reason you went back to Spelman? As opposed to going to**
83 **a non-minority institution?**

84

85 A: That's exactly the reason I went back, and exactly the reason I have not accepted some offers
86 to leave. Because it's ... to be a woman in this field, and then, again, to be a black woman,
87 makes you such a minority that if you can't see that people can do it, it makes it really hard
88 to believe that you can.
89

90 **E: So your students have you there encouraging them ...**

91

92 A: They have me there and I'm half model and half momma. And I'll have one of them come
93 back and they'll say, "Well, Dr. Lawrence told me I was going to graduate school and she
94 took me to school and introduced me to the chair and next thing I knew I was enrolled!" And
95 I've had several stories like [that].
96

[7:38]