

Speaker 1: As part of the University of Michigan's Bicentennial celebration, the U of M Library brought StoryCorps to campus to capture personal stories of those who make up the University's rich history.

For this installment in our series, Karen Downing, a U of M librarian, sat down with her father, Harold R. Johnson, to talk about what it was like to make history as the first black dean at the University of Michigan.

Karen Downing: In 1981, you became the first black dean at the University. I was an undergraduate at the U of M then, and I remember being so proud of you, and a bit aghast that you were the first. Talk about what it was like being the first black dean.

Harold R. J.: Well, it was difficult, not so much being dean, but I think being perhaps the most prominent black on campus or at least the black with the most visibility on campus, because what happened was that students and faculty who had problems of any kind would come to me with their problems. Sometimes I could refer them to someone else, other times I tried to help them personally, but it sort of doubled the workload. I had to run the school and also sort of take care of many members of the black community on campus, both faculty and students, so it was kind of onerous. There also were people who certainly resented the fact that I was black and dean, including some members of my faculty, and they tried to make life difficult for me, but I think all in all, it went reasonably well, and I'm, I think, fairly proud of my accomplishments as dean.

We became the number one school, that was my goal when I took the job. I said I was going to make it the number one school of social work in the country, and I think it took me about three years to get there. The school has maintained that ranking I think every year since, that was about 1984, except for one year when the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at the Washington University in St. Louis was ranked number one. So, I think it was a successful appointment.

Karen Downing: When you look back on your career, do you have any thoughts about things that you would do differently or things that you are most proud of?

Harold R. J.: Well, I think I would have liked to have become President of the University of Michigan, and maybe I should have.

In 19, I think it was '78, I was recommended to become Provost. The regents in their wisdom decided not to approve the recommendation made by Harold Shapiro, who was President at that time. Their rationale was there was two names given to them, and they said the other person wasn't qualified, so, in fact, they were only given one name, and they said they wanted two names, so they asked the search committee to go back and come up with some more

names. The search committee declined, and said, "We did our job. We gave you two qualified people, and that's it. We're not going to do it again," so I was not approved.

If I had of become Provost at that time, I was certainly in line to become President of the University, and you know that was kind of a bitter experience, and as far as I'm concerned, the refusal was based strictly on race and nothing more.

Karen Downing: This is during the time that one of the regents was openly speaking-

Harold R. J.: Yeah, there was.

Karen Downing: ... in racist ways.

Harold R. J.: Yep. There was one particular regent who I will not name, but-

Karen Downing: Yes.

Harold R. J.: ... who was very anti-minority, anti-gay, anti-

Karen Downing: Jewish.

Harold R. J.: ... anti-everything, you know.

Karen Downing: Yeah.

Harold R. J.: That left a bad taste in my mouth for a long time, then, of course, they turned around and appointed me dean.

Would I have done things differently? I don't think so. If I had to do it again, I might have pushed on some things a little harder than I did, although I'd pushed to the point of being excluded from certain kinds of activities and gatherings and so on and so forth. I was always kind of an outlier, you know?

Karen Downing: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Harold R. J.: In terms of the administration of the school, or the time I served as consult to the President or the Secretary of the University, I think I did about as good a job as could be done.

Speaker 1: That was Harold R. Johnson talking with his daughter, Karen Downing, about making history as the first black dean at the University of Michigan. These interviews were recorded by StoryCorps, www.storycorps.org. For more from the series, visit arts.umich.edu/storycorps.