



Story Circles

The Akron Story Circle Project Team

The stories that follow were collected by the Akron Story Circle Project team in the spring of 2019. We recorded these through story circles in response to a request from the *Hail We Akron!* organizers. These thoughtful and empathetic organizers realized that they did not want to preclude by fiat stories from those in our community whose identities might make public authorship difficult to impossible. The Akron Story Circle Project team has organized the stories we collected into themes that emerged during the story circle event; otherwise, these are our colleagues' stories, as told and unedited.

This is My Community, Too!

A part-time instructor who was African American was a graduate student who I had mentored. She got some very negative student evaluations from two young men. They were white, and they complained that she talked too much about race in her classes, and, on that basis, she was not going to be rehired as an adjunct... In the end she was rehired. But there was that uncomfortable, unhappy thing that happens and it is part of the reason that there is not as much diversity in our teaching.

When one is on a tenure committee and students are making those types of comments, sometimes that can be taken as, "Oh, that's negative". But... those types of comments should be viewed as, "Oh, this person must be actually trying to inspire their students to think about these core issues and questions." That's not something we should think of as negative; that should be considered positive whether the students realize it at the time or not.

We had an organization...focused on retention and recruitment of African American students, faculty, staff, and administrators. Each year, we'd meet with administrators. It's like you take one step forward and two steps backward. Administrators listen, but nothing changes. I came on this campus and looked up, and I saw African American faculty. And now I look up, and they're all gone. And I look up and I say, so how do you expect me to be comfortable in this climate?

The African American students that I've worked with

share stories with me about the climate not being receptive to them....

I was at a meeting once, and a key administrator asked me a question. He asked, "Why are you concerned about African American students and retention?" I was stunned. I was like, "I don't understand your question. Why should I not be? If I am not concerned, then who is going to be concerned?"

Every step that I've made at Akron was a step I was told that I couldn't make.... And we happened to work at a place that probably will never have an African American president. Never. Not ready yet.

[Responding to the question, "What difference will sharing these experiences make?"]

I don't know what difference it makes. I absolutely don't, because historically it hasn't made a difference. But I firmly believe that if we don't tell the story, we give in to it. And the probability of a difference occurring diminishes. And I firmly believe that having information included in a document that speaks to some of the challenges that the University may have dealt with gives more credibility to that document. So, I'm going to remain in that space of being hopeful.

But we've been fighting these issues for so long, and it doesn't seem like the president and provost and board of trustees are listening.

We are tired, and it's like, this is my University, too. I've

made tremendous contributions, but let's address this issue over here, too.

There's that balloon out of air again.

There's a conversation that has to be had about whiteness in the classroom. That de-centering feeling you, [Speaker 1], describe is important for white faculty, in the same way that more male faculty need to be aware of it and more heterosexual faculty of it. It's just that double consciousness.

There's a friend of mine on campus, she's a contract professional. We get lunch at the Greek Church as often as we can, and we talk about what's going on at the University. We completed our doctoral programs together; we're pretty close. This is someone I'm friends with on social media, and I see her check in all the time on campus. She's here all the time. She's at sporting events, she's here...anything at the University, this person does. And I always get jealous when I see that, because I was a graduate student here for three years and I didn't have the greatest experience, I didn't leave with the greatest impression of my program or of the University, and yet I came back to teach here....

I've struggled to create a sense of purpose with the University.... And so, I think about what would be necessary to create that sense of pride in the University that I really desperately want to have. It's been a tough few years.... And yet I stay. I'm highly marketable, yet I stay. And the best way I

describe it to other people is that I have a commitment to the people in this city and not to the University. It makes me sad. Because I want to have that commitment to my University as well as to the people who attend it.

I recently retired after over thirty years of teaching at The University of Akron. In the late 1980s, I was an untenured young faculty member. I was so happy to have a job doing something I loved. And I didn't know how fragile that happiness was. I was walking across campus one day, on a beautiful spring day, and I ran into the department chair of another department in my College. I didn't really know him, but because it was so pretty outside, we stopped to chat. He introduced me to his daughter, and I said, "What beautiful earrings you have!" She said her grandmother had given them to her. And that was it; I went on my way.

The next day...I went to my faculty mailbox and there was an envelope in my mailbox. I opened it and inside were three journal articles from a sociology journal. I read them and I realized there was a theme to the articles. The theme involved creative but criminally-minded persons pursuing young girls. The researchers were trying to determine the nature of their creativity and also of their perversion. Then, scrawled in handwriting, was, "You may be creative, but not with my daughter." I just stood for a while until I realized that there was a kind of danger in this packet of material to me. I didn't really know what to do, so I went to my department head with the

packet and I showed him what it was and said, "What do you think of this?" He said he thought this person was just kidding. I said, "I don't feel really kidded about this," so I made an appointment with my dean, who was a woman. She said yes, she thought this was troubling to her, too and suggested I go to the EEO office.

So, I made an appointment and asked what to do about this. I said I don't really know what to do, I don't feel really comfortable making a formal complaint, and yet I feel threatened somehow by this... I said I would just like to think about it for a while, and so I went home, and I think the EEO office must have contacted that department chair almost immediately because the next day I came into my office, and there outside the door was a bouquet of roses with a note that said, "I'm so sorry that you misunderstood me, and I hope that you'll forgive me."

And I did. That was it... Happily, nothing came of it again. But it was a sign of the difficulty of talking about those things in the 1980s. There were not many choices for making things more clear or right.

[Thinking about the] All-Campus Student Recognition Banquet, we never saw African American students there. ...We organized our own event. Someone said to me, "Why are you segregating yourselves?" Next year we all went to the All-Campus Student Recognition Banquet and were asked why were we all sitting together!

I've been here for over thirty years, and one of our goals for the whole time was to hire minority faculty. It's not an easy task. And I don't even know why it's not an easy task, but everyone says it's not easy. So, we were given money specifically to hire an African American faculty member. Just for that. We had the money to do that. We were all excited. [We hired an expert of significant reputation.] He was also a great community person. He was really talented.

But the department, at that point, was going toward a [particular] point of view. We really did not want to be seen as old fashioned. I think a version of this must happen in every school. So the students did not want to learn the skills [that were this person's strength.] And he put a little bit of a drag on them, you know. He was demanding that they learn certain things in his classes. And he wasn't the only person here in the field, so there was a good range. ...It was, in my mind, an ideal department. But there was a lot of tension between this man and the rest of the faculty. And he left. He felt very unappreciated. ...I think sometimes the goals of the institutions can be so inflexible that we can't really have the diversity we want, that we need, because we demand that everyone kind of be the same.

Painful Persistence

There was a group of us that got together, and we looked at every angle, everything we thought was relevant to what was

keeping us from getting a more diverse faculty but also employees outside [faculty]. We came up with a number of strategies that we knew had to be tweaked, and we presented them across campus. We were invited into other meetings to talk about these strategies. We gave them, and then two months later we went back....We must have presented this eight times at least across the campus over the span of a year and a half. To my knowledge *nothing* was ever done with the list of recommendations. Nothing was done.

I remember there was a time when top administrators at this University were interested in inclusive excellence, and they sent a group of us to a conference on diversity to bring ideas back to the University. That was a time when I felt valued as an African American faculty member. But not long after that, there was a time when the University clearly didn't care about diversity, and they demonstrated that by letting African Americans leaving the University—they demonstrated that by policies and procedures that didn't include African American students. I was just with a group working on the Three Year Plan, and, in that plan, there is nothing about diversity. When I look at that plan, I see myself as invisible. I see black students as invisible. I see black staff as invisible. I see black faculty as invisible. But at the same time, I am supposed to embrace this plan. I am supposed to embrace this 150 year anniversary while this University is not embracing the people I love.

I've been here a long time. And these issues were there when I came. When I came, there were hopeful spots. But when I look now, the hope is just gone. And when you no longer have hope, that is a difficult position to be in. I look at all the decisions being made, and I think, you say to a young person that you can excel, but you need role models, you need people that look like you. And then I look at the University and I say, who's in administration that looks like these students...? No presidents, no vice presidents, no provost, no associate provost. The deans that we had are no longer there. The full faculty? You can count the number of African American full professors on the campus on one hand. We have no African American distinguished professors. It went beyond sad. I was just so frustrated and disappointed because I am putting in effort because I value the University, but is the University valuing what I'm trying to do such that when I look up and see distinguished professors, I see someone that looks like me, too?

At a faculty meeting, one colleague mentioned that, when she first met me, she was really afraid of me. After working with me for a couple years, she lost that fear. A couple of our colleagues chimed in and said they had the same experience.

So, once upon a time, I was sitting in the department chair's office to talk about my teaching load for the next semester. She informed me I was not going to be allowed to teach a class I wanted to teach, which I thought I was very competent for. And so I went in to challenge her as to why she

was not allowing me to teach that class. Her response was that it was out of my area. My response to that was, “But I have taught the class before, and I learned under a colleague who was an expert in the area. We team-taught the class for four or five semesters together.” I thought I was very competent to teach that.

The chair said I didn’t have the course work, and I argued I did have the course work in my doctoral program. And so we went back and forth. Then, during our conversation, all of a sudden, she stopped when someone came in. My back was to the door, so I could not see the person who came into the office. They had a conversation, and part of the conversation from the chair’s perspective was she said, “Everything is okay; nothing has happened. I am fine, and I will get ahold of you after we finish our conversation.” While she was saying that, I really wanted to turn around and look at who was standing behind me.

The person standing behind me was never introduced to me. And finally left. We continued the conversation. It really bothered me—the sense I was getting was that the chair felt unsafe with me in the office. And this is a person they pre-arranged to look in and see if I was behaving. And the connotation behind choosing those words, “was I behaving?” is something I do want to stress.

I started at The University of Akron when I was seventeen, graduated when I was twenty-one, started law school

(elsewhere) at twenty-one, left at twenty-two. Then I came back [to Akron] for a master's, taught part-time with an assistantship for years, and then became part-time faculty. I met my husband on campus, and both of my children have graduated from the University. Dr. --- was my mentor and has turned out to be a great friend. He came to our wedding. He is the godfather of my oldest child. And I continue teaching part time at the University because I like it....

I was given an opportunity to move to [a service unit focused on an underserved subset of students]. I had no administrative experience on campus. I was an advisor but had no administrative experience. And there was a learning curve. But I fell into the best job in the entire universe. I had a lot of fun building what I did. It's a unique place on campus. It's a unique place in the state of Ohio and in the country. The problem I'm having is nobody cares. Now, let me rephrase that: the students care. I don't work anymore for The University of Akron; I work for the students at The University of Akron. And it's a very frustrating situation for me to sit there and look at all my [sobbing] ... and have people quit coming, and what could it be if we could appreciate a population that has no apparent worth on this campus?

So, the story I want to tell is sad one. It happens to be something from the very last year of my service. A faculty member who worked for one of the departments in my college was stopped in his car with his wife on Exchange Street soon

after there had been a robbery, with threats of violence but without violence. And the perpetrators of the robbery were believed to be African American. Now my faculty member, rising young star, was a very fine person. He was with his wife on break, and he was roused out of his car [by the police]. Nothing violent about the way he was stopped or arrested, just the fact that it was done in front of his wife at a time when he had every reason to be in the city. He was right in front of his University. He wasn't far from his home....

I heard about this, I spoke with him, and I wrote a follow-up email in which I said, "I'm really sorry that you've had this experience with DWB"—I used the abbreviation for driving while black. This is fifteen years ago. That email went to a number of people, and it went to somebody in high administration at the University. And they called me in and said that I was attacking the police department. He brought in the campus chief of police, and I was supposed to apologize for having used the phrase. But I wouldn't.

Hard to Feel Human in an Overly Rigid Hierarchy

I know it is a cliché story at this point, but these [gender] things really happen, so I think it is worth telling. My department was asked by the dean to propose a plan for how we could become more distinctive in our programming. I had suggested the plan that we settled on, so when we met with the dean and he asked for our ideas, I spoke up first. When I finished, he looked a little perplexed and shook a hand in the

air as if trying to brush my words away. “No, no, no,” he said. “I don’t see how that will be effective. Are there any other ideas?” A male colleague caught my eye and then raised his hand and restated what I had suggested as if it was a new and different idea. “Ah,” said the dean, “now that is something I think we can work with.” The only positive thing was that after the dean left, my chair, also a man, acknowledged what had happened and said “If I hadn’t seen it, I wouldn’t have believed it.” Of course, that is a part of the problem, too.

...I had a student, probably the most conservative person I have ever met in my life. And he made some comments about how it would be appropriate for someone to outright kill someone if they met them and took them home from a bar and discovered that they were transgender and hadn’t disclosed that. He thought that it was totally permissible to do that. [Several other Story Circle participants interject with “to kill them?”] Yes, he thought that would be justified, like gay-panic. You know, that it would be a justifiable defense. And I was standing in front of the classroom and sort of thinking, how do I handle this one? Could I take it as a teaching moment? I tried to meet him where he was. Like I said, I’m from a very conservative place and I’m very familiar with the language and with the arguments.

One day [he and I] ended up spending three hours after class just talking. And I was trying to get him at his own level, get him to see that his arguments didn’t make a lot of sense.

And he just looked at me and said, “Well, you know I’m pretty anti-gay.” And I was on the one hand offended because I like to think that when I walk into a room, sprinkles and unicorns come out. And so, did he not know who I was—have no idea? And on the other hand, I was thinking, is he trying to get a rise out of me, trying to get me to say something? And I went home, and I just thought, how do you deal with that when you have a student who tells you they hate you for who you are—or who they don’t even know you to be, but you know you are?

I went to [an Akron Public School] and decided to go to The University of Akron because it was all paid for. Didn’t really look into other colleges. Kind of wish I had now. I was in the Honors College, went in for academic advising right at the beginning of my first semester right before...got really bad advice, like, “Only take twelve credit hours because you don’t know how college is going to be....” I was undecided, so I was trying to experiment with different majors, like, what do I want to do, I have no idea.

I still have no idea, but, so they signed me up for classes I couldn’t be in, telling me to only take twelve credits, which, I couldn’t have graduated on time if I had listened. But as the first few weeks unfolded, I realized the terrible advice I had gotten and corrected it, figured out how to get myself into the classes I needed to be in. Did what I needed to do. Decided I was not going back to academic advising for the rest of my undergrad. And I didn’t.

I had an appointment at 11:30 today with a young woman, twenty-nine years old. She had four kids. [Majoring] in social work. And she was almost out of her pile of financial money to go to school. And she was worried. But she had been to four different offices on campus to try to find help. And she came in and sat down fully expecting...not much. But before she left, fifteen minutes later, she would wind up with three scholarship applications, another appointment, and “Y, you can come back in here tomorrow and bring your kids. Because I have coloring books, and it will be okay.” And she said nowhere else on campus is like that.

Connecting to Good People & Finding Something to Be Passionate About Here

This community really wants a University of Akron. ...We've been rolling downhill not because of the individual wonderful people that might be there, but all of the budgetary and all of the little things that accrue that are bringing us down. And it might not be that the University can manage itself. It might be that the answer isn't inside. It might be that more people need to speak up and say, enough of this.

So, I live daily in a wonderful location at The University of Akron. I can't count how many impressive students and faculty and staff people, and really importantly, community partners

intersect where I work. And I worry sometimes that it's a fantasy, but we have students getting connected to strong community partners where they get these experiences in the vital medium of the community. And they come back and they say, that just changed my whole approach to education. All of this positive energy is just flowing between the University and the community at this level—this lower level....Students who need an experience to bring their studies to life, professors who want to change up the way they do their courses. Staff, who, in their work and as volunteers, build bridges. I feel like the head of the University needs to look down and see that our power and our strength are connected to the community. As you just said, the community wants/needs the University. Well, this University needs this community. And we have such a community. If we could get the head—not just one person, I mean, but the top of the structure—to look down. Look around, and see not just the community, but the flow of energy between their faculty, staff, students, and community, the structure would know that it needs to bend, to adapt, and how it needs to embrace and facilitate the good work that has been here, is here, is already going on despite a lot of neglect.

...I see the university engaging with race on two levels. We have this community level where we have programming like Rethinking Race and grassroots initiatives where we can talk about race, and our students want to talk about it, and they want to learn more about it... And yet outside these initiatives, there

is seemingly no place for them to go. I was told that my class was the first class addressing race that had been taught in the history of the department, and I had students from [a wide range of majors] all coming together to talk about this subject. They wanted to know when I would teach it again, but it was unclear if it was going to be regular or was a one-off.

My connection is that I was somehow thrust into the position of an organizer of the Vagina Monologues [a gender-focused production] sponsored by The University of Akron, benefiting the Rape Crisis Centers of Medina and Summit County....I emailed the individual in charge at the time, and they said, "Absolutely, we have community members. Come on, audition." I was cast.

I acted in it for several years. As we know what happened at The University of Akron a couple of years ago, there were quite a few cuts, and part of that was the professor who was running the Vagina Monologues. And I knew how powerful it was, every year, for every student, every professor, every staff member, every community member that was a participant and an audience member. We had some really powerful moments and powerful memories. And throughout my years of doing it, it's been very moving. It's my favorite part of the year.

So, I took it upon myself to email anyone I could who might be interested, Women's Studies, English professors. I'm not an alum, so I didn't know anyone. I was just looking in directories saying "Hi. This is great event. Please take it. I'm

just a community member, I can't sponsor this, but I would like it to continue. It seemed to do really well here and people really liked it." And I met up with someone and we just finished our third year together, co-organizing it, continuing to raise money for the Rape Crisis Center. What I like most about it is every time it auditions, everyone comes in individually. They come in with their own story, their own reason behind it. It's not a whole group, like "Oh, we're going to do this, and it's going to be the best time together!" It is the best time, but they go into it for a particular reason, especially now with the #metoo movement going on. It's been...every year I say, "This is the most important year we're doing it." Every year I'm correct. Every year it's the most important time. Every year there's somebody's story that needs to be told.

My husband was not really anxious about my returning to school. But for me, it was something I felt I needed to do. I was a graduate student in the College of Education with about twenty years already as an educator, and I decided to work on a master's degree in higher education because I wanted to give my children the opportunity to go on to college, and I couldn't see that we had the resources to be able to do that. I started in August. I broke my hand in three places, and I thought, "Oh no, that's over." [My professor] in the College of Education at the time said, "You can do this. You can do this. You can do that." And I finished my master's degree in a year.

I graduated last May. Three of my favorite professors were in three different departments. One was in Sociology, one was in History, and one was in Anthropology. The one in Anthropology helped me get an internship in Puerto Rico. So I worked with her a lot with that. The one in History, I created an UnClass with her, so I worked closely with her on that. And then Sociology, I did the Conflict Transformation Certificate, so I took classes with him. So I am outside of my discipline, really working with these professors, watching them work with students, really doing 110 percent, pouring into them, kind of amazing.

It's May last semester, and half of them are leaving. They all had different reasons. But from my point of view you could link all of them to a lack of support for them. So, two of them are women of color. And I think that had a lot to do with it. Like I watched the History professor get "tone policed" by the Rethinking Race committee. You know the irony there. You watch the struggle, these people that really care about the students... Okay, so here's how I'm going to phrase it: From my perspective, these professors that actually really care about the individuals in the classroom are the ones that are leaving.... It kind of hurts, I guess, because I was like, these are the people that make me like this University, and they are all leaving. There are still professors here that I like, and two of them are going to be listening to this, so I've got to say that.

On March 8, 2005, Paul Daum, a man who had stood up with me at my wedding as best man in 1969—and would become my colleague when I returned to the University, having first been my teacher—died very suddenly. Paul was a homosexual. He never came out in his lifetime to any of the people at The University of Akron. The story I want to tell is how, because of a lot of circumstances, that he'd become a major donor to the University, that he was the longest-serving faculty member at his sudden death in 2005. The occasion of his death was celebrated on campus, then President Luis Proenza came and declared it Paul Daum Day. And the player at the memorial service we held was a member of the Order of the Phoenix, something that was created under his presidency to honor people. Now, what was important to me, and the reason I tell this story, is that the event at what was then called Daum Theater in Kolbe Hall was attended by close friends who extended into the community, that had lots of contacts with the University but not as a single community, not as a community largely of other men who were homosexuals. They were all there. It was a wonderful witness of what Paul meant to the University and to the fact that what Paul could never admit in his lifetime, even to me, became in his death a piece of “landscape for learning” at UA: a beloved teacher and major University donor “came out” only in death. Had it occurred ten years earlier, I don't think it could have been.

The stories collected here are included in the loving memory of one long-time UA colleague who has passed and who remained closeted for his entire forty-five year career at the University, and to all those, who, like him, chose and continue to choose to contribute to the UA community in myriad powerful ways despite the significant injuries and obstacles they must endure to do so. We are all, colleagues and students, graduates and community partners, deeply grateful and profoundly inspired by their stories.