

**Perspective of Change:
The story of civil rights, diversity, inclusion and
access to education at HMS and HSDM**

Interview with Matthew Plummer | July 10, 2019

JOAN ILACQUA: All right, so we're now recording. So, to introduce, this is Joan Ilacqua, and I'm here with Dr. Matthew E. Plummer, Jr. Today is --

DR. MATTHEW W. PLUMMER, JR.: Matthew W.

JI: W!

MP: Matthew W.

JI: Oh my gosh. So we already at the beginning. Let me restart. So... (laughter) Today is July 10th, 2019. I'm Joan Ilacqua. I'm here with Dr. Matthew W. Plummer, Jr., and we're doing a phone interview as part of this Equal Access Oral History Project. Dr. Plummer, do I have your permission to record us today?

MP: You do.

JI: Excellent. So my first question is completely background, so it should be easy: if you could just tell me a bit about yourself; where'd you grow up?

MP: I grew up in Houston, Texas, in a segregated community. I went to elementary school in Houston, junior high school -- it's called middle school now, I think -- and high school,

Phillis Wheatley High School in Houston Texas. All were segregated schools, 'cause that was the situation back in the late '50s and early '60s. I graduated summa cum laude from Phillis Wheatly High School in '61. I then left Houston and went to Atlanta, Georgia, to enter Morehouse College. I spent four years at Morehouse, graduated in 1965 with a BS in mathematics and a minor in biology.

JJ: So when you... I'm trying to think of where to start. Had you decided during college that you wanted to be a dentist or -- with a degree in math, and the -- excuse me for not knowing, but had you intended to do something else with your math degree, or did you always want to be a dentist?

MP: Well, when I was about 10 or 11 years old, I was -- I was a thumb-sucker. And so about 11 -- I guess 11 to 12, my mother took me to a dentist who had never done braces before, but he wanted to try (laughter) and -- to do braces. And so I was one of his first patients. And, of course, my upper teeth were very protrusive, and as we -- as I wore the braces and got everything back in line, I was very amazed at what he could do. And I think that was my first inkling of that I probably would want to be a dentist. I wasn't sure. I didn't -- I wasn't -- I hadn't made up my mind firmly at that time, but that was an interesting experience. So I --

JI: Um --

MP: -- I went to More--

JI: Mm-hmm?

MP: I went to Morehouse. Majored in math, with a minor in biology. I had considered doing something in -- doing something in math, teaching math, but I -- but I also liked medicine. That's why I majored in -- minored in biology. And I really didn't firmly decide what I wanted to do until after graduating from Morehouse. I left Morehouse in '65, joined the Peace Corps, and I had a two-year tour in Kenya, East Africa. That was also an interesting experience. I'd never been out of the country before, obviously, and I'd never been -- I had never been north before. I hadn't been anywhere, actually, before I went to Morehouse. In Kenya, East Africa, I taught math and science, and it was my time there that I start thinking about what type of profession I wanted to pursue once I returned to the States.

JI: Wow. To jump back before the Peace Corps, so you grew up in Houston. You moved to Atlanta. What did your parents do?

MP: My father was a civil rights attorney, [00:05:00] here in Houston, and he practiced law. My mother was a guidance counselor for the Houston Independent School District, which, again, we had segregated schools, and so she was a

guidance counselor at the school that I attended, which was, like I indicated earlier, Phillis Wheatley Senior High School.

JJ: And so when you decided to join the Peace Corps after graduating... I mean, it's kind of hard to ask what was your plan, because I think -- personally, I did something similar -- but were you just -- did you want to give back? Did you want to see the world? Was there any, you know...? What was that about?

MP: Well, you know, at the -- in the early '60s, there were a lot of people talking about Africa, and the Peace Corps -- the Peace Corps allowed me to have that opportunity to visit Africa, to visit my roots, to experience another culture, another language. And I think that was the motivation for doing it. I just... And the Vietnam War was -- the Vietnam War was hot and heavy, and I wanted to have a different experience, and the Peace Corps allowed me that opportunity to, I guess, to see a different part of the world, have a different set of experiences outside of the United States.

JJ: Excellent. So you spent, did you say, two years in Kenya?

MP: I spent two years in Kenya, teaching math, and, you know, the maths and the physics and the biology. It was just at a secondary school level, and normally the science and math

teachers at the secondary school level are taught multiple courses. So I taught math, I taught biology, I taught physics, and that's -- and that's about it.

JJ: Hmm. And so when you figure -- finished up your term, your service with the Peace Corps, where'd you come back to? Did you move back to Atlanta? Did you move back home?

MP: I -- when I was in the Peace Corps, I fell in love with a young lady from Zanzibar, East Africa. We got married, and we came back to Houston. When I arrived back in Houston, I taught school at -- I taught junior high school math in the Houston Independent School District, and I taught math for a year and a half. It was during that time that I decided that I wanted to go to dental school. And I made application to three schools. I knew already had -- knew of two schools; that was Howard and Meharry. Now, those were the predominantly black dental schools, and those were the only ones that people in my community knew about. One Sunday evening I went to my parents' house and sat down with my mother and father, and told them that I did want to go to dental school. Here's the application. I've already selected Howard and Meharry to apply to, but I needed one third choice, and I needed their help in determining what their third choice would be. My mother said, "Apply to Harvard." And I clearly remember telling Mama, I said,

"Mama, Harvard is not gonna accept a black kid with a big afro." (laughter) And she said, "That's OK, son. Apply to Harvard." And, of course, in those days, what your parents told you what to do, you did it, right? So I checked Harvard as my third choice and sent out the application.

JJ: And then you got in.

MP: And then, [00:10:00] to my surprise, (laughter) I got in. And, of course, I was extremely excited. My parents were excited. So we made -- we made preparation to go to Harvard. I had never been to the North. The only thing about Boston that I -- Boston that I knew about is what, you know, what you read, what I had read. And, of course, we didn't have the internet in those days, so my knowledge of Boston and the Boston community, and even of Harvard, was fairly limited.

JJ: Mm-hmm. (pause)

MP: So... I'm -- I -- during that -- after my acceptance, Jim Mulvihill, who is really a great guy from Harvard, came to Houston. We talked about finances, how I would finance my dental education. And he said that he would -- he was working on a situation that would help me alleviate some of the cost. And that situation was he had contacted Wellesley College to see if they could employ my wife and I as house parents. And that came through: my wife and I

were the first house parents at Wellesley College, which saved me a ton of money, because Wellesley paid us a small stipend, but we ate free and we lived free. So my expenses relative to living, you know, was car, gasoline, car insurance, those kinds of things. So my entire time at Harvard, I -- my wife and I served as house parents at Wellesley.

JJ: That's so in-- I've never heard -- no one's told me that, that they, you know -- that someone at Harvard helped them find something like that. That's so fascinating. And so you [drove in?] --

MP: Yeah, like I said... (laughter) Yeah, Mulvihill was really -- he was really committed to diversity at the dental school, and I think all of my -- all of my classmate he did whatever he could to make our transition from wherever we were coming from to Harvard to be as painless and as friendly and as welcoming as he possibly could. And that -- I mean, that was a -- like I said, from an economic perspective, that was really amazing.

JJ: So how was the -- was there a learning curve, learning to live in the North? And I'm thinking, like -- I've only been to Texas a few times but I'm up in New England. Weather is different. The people are different. (laughs)

The driving is different. You know, what was it like moving up here?

MP: I guess the most -- the most challenging part of the -- of moving up there was the weather. I had never been in a place that snowed as much, and it was cold a lot of the -- you know, most of the year, or a significant part of the year. I had to buy coats and gloves and boots and all of that stuff that, you know, we don't have -- we don't have to use -- we don't have to -- we didn't have to have that in the South, and especially in Houston. So that was a -- that was a challenge. The people -- also, in the South, we had a large black community, a large middle-class, upper-middle-class black community. And Houston being a segregated city, we -- there was very little interaction between black people and white people. And so all of our social and educational activity was done within our -- within our group. When I came to Boston, we did not have -- there was no black middle-class, upper-middle-class community in Boston. And, you know, you felt isolated because the only people that you could socialize with were your [00:15:00] classmates, and the minority students that were on campus. And the food is different, of course. You know, a hamburger in Texas does not taste like a hamburger

in Boston, (laughter) and there's no barbecue, real barbecue, in Boston, like there is --

JI: Oh --

MP: -- here in (laughs) Houston.

JI: There's still not. (laughter)

MP: That's probably correct.

JI: So could you tell me about -- so when you come to Boston, you're living in Wellesley. What was it like going to the School of Dental Medicine there? Like, you know, did you -- were you involved with any clubs? Were there any, you know, specific student things going on that you remember?

MP: Yes, the -- of course, living off-campus and being married, for me, my life was a little bit different than the students, the dental students and medical students who lived in the dorm, and most of whom were not married. So I would go to school every day, and, of course, I would come home in the evening to be with my wife and to do studies and things like that. But while at the -- while at the dental school, there was a health careers summer program that the Medical School had, and the purpose of that program was to invite, during the summer, minority students, and give them an introduction to medicine and medical care and to healthcare. I worked with that program during the summers, and I also served as a minority

recruiter for the Medical School, the dental school, and the School of Public Health while I was -- while I was there. And those are the only activities -- club-related or social activities that I was involved in.

JI: Could I ask you some more about the -- about being a recruiter? What did that involve?

MP: That involved going to traditional black colleges in the area, and as far as Atlanta, to introduce ourselves and introduce Harvard, both the Medical School and the School of -- and the dental school, and later the School of Public Health, introduce to them the concept, the oppor-- the concept that, you know, you can go to Harvard if you apply yourself. And we were able to get some interest from the schools Howard, Howard University, Harvard -- I mean Morehouse, Spelman, Xavier. In fact, the year after I entered we had several ladies from Spelman College to come to Harvard Medical School, so it was a worthwhile endeavor.

JI: And when you did that, did they -- were they just sending students, or were there faculty who worked with you, or...?

MP: No, there were just students, just us. (pause) There were no -- there -- we didn't -- there were no faculty, no.

JI: Mm-hmm. My next question is (laughs) -- and Harvard, like, paid for you to do that, right? Harvard supported you?

MP: Yes.

JI: OK. (laughs)

MP: Yeah, Harvard supported it, yes, yes.

JI: I realize, as I'm thinking about that question, I realized I hadn't -- I haven't asked anyone that, and I just -- I wondered, because sometimes you hear about students doing grassroots recruiting, and I just -- I wasn't sure what was going on then. So... But speaking, again, about faculty, did you have any -- other than Jim Mulvihill, any mentors or, you know, relationships with faculty members while you were at Harvard?

MP: Well, yes, Dr. Poussaint was a mentor. And I guess primarily because he was the only -- he was the only African American there, and when we had social problems or political problems, many of us would go to -- share that with Dr. Poussaint, for two reasons: one reason is so he could be aware of what we were experiencing, and the other reason was to get advice from him, how [00:20:00] should we handle a particular situation. One situation I can describe, I never will forget: it was about lunchtime, and I was at my locker, and I think it was called Building C. They've changed the names of the buildings now and so I'm not sure what it's called now, but it was Building C. I was getting ready to go to a chemistry class, biochemistry class. I was standing at my locker, and several of the

medischool-- medical students approached me, and you could see by the expression on their faces that something was not right. When they came I said, "What's goin' on, guys?" And they said that they had heard that one of the professors had referred to those -- the freshman class, the brothers, the black folks in the freshman class, as Black Panthers. And I'm not sure if you know, if you're aware, but the Black Panthers was a political movement, a very radical political movement, that started in the -- in the -- in the early '60s. And to be referred to as Black Parents [sic] was extremely shocking, because, you know, we thought Boston would be different. We thought Boston, the bastion of liberalism, surely the racist experiences that we ex-- we were accustomed to in the South would surely not be prevalent in Boston. And that was not really the case. Boston was a very segregated, covert racist society, and we did not expect that. We discussed this with Dr. Poussaint, and he assured us that we would all be treated with respect, and for us not to worry about it. And that proved to be the case.

JJ: (pause) Great. While you were at... So I have a couple of sort of questions. One of them is that you went on to get your Master's of Public Health after you finished your

dental degree. What influenced that decision? What encouraged you to...? Why'd you get an MPH?

MP: Ah, OK, before I do that, let me also -- let me go back to when I was at the -- you know, at the dental school, between --

JI: Yeah.

MP: -- what... I think it was '72 to '74. While I was at the dental school, I realized, and we all realized, there were very few black and brown students at the -- at Harvard Medical School and Harvard dental school. In fact, we were the first class. And one of our -- one of our goals was to do what we could do to ensure that Harvard would continually have black and brown students enrolled in the -- in the -- in the coming years. I presented a paper on the numbers of black students that were going to predominantly white dental schools in the country. And that paper was -- the result of that paper was disseminated, but at some point in '72 I got a call from Abt Associates. I think Abt Associates is still going on in Boston. Abt --

JI: What was...?

MP: -- Abt Associates... Abt, A-B-T, Associates. It was a --

JI: OK.

MP: -- consulting firm.

JI: Hmm.

MP: It was a consulting firm, and... In -- it's in Cambridge, actually. And they asked me to be an analyst for them.

They had received a grant from the National Institutes of Dental Health to evaluate and document the effects of altering traditional dental school recruitment and admission policies for minority students. And so I would do this in between classes, and during the summer.

[00:25:00] And we conducted -- as a part of that grant that Abt Associates received, we analyzed the recruiting practices and the minority programs from -- for most of the dental schools across the country.

JI: Wow.

MP: And we developed a list of the best practices. And the -- that report was presented in a couple of different ways. First of all, we conducted a workshop on minority education on dentistry. We published a guide for the development of dental care programs for the -- for minority students. We developed a -- we published a best practices that we could identify from various schools across the country, and that project actually served as the blueprint for the explosion of minority programs in predominantly white dental schools across the country during the, you know, the late '70s and early '80s. A lot of --

JI: Wow.

MP: -- schools used that blueprint to develop their minority programs. Now, back to your question on the School of Public Health. I think the -- I wanted to go to School of Public Health because -- in dental schools you learn a lot about dentistry, and about providing dental care, but you don't -- you don't learn anything about the business of operating a dental practice, and those kinds of things. And so I got a Master's in Public Health with a concentration in administration so I could understand how to run... I mean, my purpose was to try to learn how to run a practice, how to set up a practice. And that was very helpful. And that degree has been very helpful to me over the years.

JI: Yeah, and you had mentioned that you went out and recruited for the School of Public Health, as well. Were you doing that --

MP: Yes.

JI: -- while you were working on the degree, or...? Was this all concurrent?

MP: Yes.

JI: I'm trying to... OK. (laughs)

MP: This is -- this is all happening at the same time.
(laughs)

JI: Mm-hmm.

MP: You know --

JI: And you're driving back and forth from Wellesley. (laughs)

MP: I'm driving --

JI: And --

MP: -- back and forth from Wellesley, in the snow and the freezing rain, and catching that trolley. (laughs) You would drive -- I would drive to the Wellesley station and get on the -- on the -- on the train there, and then drive to -- I don't -- I've forgotten the name of the stop; it must have been the Longwood Avenue stop -- and have to walk those five or six blocks from the -- from the train station to the dental school, in the freezing rain and... Oh, God have mercy.

JI: (laughs) Oh, goodness. That's something that also hasn't changed, but --

MP: (inaudible). (laughter)

JI: You know, just thinking about how much you were doing in addition to studying to becoming a dentist, and studying to learn how to have a practice, and to... You just had a lot going on. That's what...

MP: I have a...

JI: Yeah.

MP: Yeah, it was a full -- it was a lot going on. You're absolutely --

JI: Yeah.

MP: -- correct.

JI: So are there -- is there any other...? And I'm glad -- I'm really, really glad you brought up the -- that you worked on this report on recruiting minority dental students, but this... You know, I would love to see a copy of it, if you have one around. But are there any other, you know, big things that you're working on while you're at dental school, or at the School of Public Health? Is there anything else that you'd like to tell me about?

MP: Well, you know, doing the -- doing the -- studying for both the School of Public Health and the dental school, and doing my -- trying to be at home to spend some time with the wife and the children, my life was full. And working with Abt Associates, you know. My life was full. So I didn't have a whole lot of free time. [00:30:00]

JI: (pause) So when you... I mean, it sounds like you didn't have a lot of free time. (laughs)

MP: I didn't have a lot.

JI: No. When you were... I mean, when you finished your degree, did you stay in the Boston area, or did you -- did you move back to Houston?

MP: No, when I -- when I gradu-- when I graduated, I returned to Houston and joined the faculty at the University of Texas School of Public Health, and I taught dental public health there for four or five years after graduating. I -- and I would -- and my professor, Dr. [Jacobin?], who was at the School of Public Health, he would invite me up every year to give a lecture to -- this is at the School of Public Health -- to give a lecture of the students, to his students. I would go back every year to provide -- you know, to give a lecture on the things that I was doing at the School of Public Health. And at the School of Public Health I did one of the -- the first, rather, study on dental care for the developmentally disabled in Texas. I got a grant from a Texas agency to study access to dental care by patients who were developmentally disabled. And we did a -- as a result of that study, of that grant, we did a guide for the development of dental care for the developmentally disabled. We did a book on dental care for the developmentally disabled. And we also did a survey of dental services for non-institutionalized developmentally disabled persons in the state of Texas. Because the handicapped -- and it's still an issue today, but the handicapped had very -- had a difficult time getting dental care in a private setting. And so we surveyed all of the

dentists in the state of Texas whether or not they would treat patients who were developmentally disabled, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, Down syndrome patients, and we published that book, that guide, and we just -- and the State distributed it to those institutions that treated developmentally disabled persons. So to the ex-- so they used that as a resource, and that way they contacted dentists in their respective communities who had agreed to see these types of patients. That was -- that was -- that was... That took a lot of time while I was at the School of Public Health, while I was there as assistant professor. Then in, I think, in '79, I entered private practice, and I still practice -- I still practice today, but I entered a private practice of -- in Houston. And the -- and the public health degree that, you know, that we talked about earlier, the public health degree showed me how to write grants, and how to evaluate programs, and assess the effectiveness of certain types of programs. And I started a company that applied for a grant to provide dental services for the indigent population of Harris County. Houston, Texas sits in Harris County, and we have a hospital district called the Harris County Hospital District. And I wrote a proposal to provide dental care for the indigent of Harris County, because Harris County up

until that point, up until that time, did not provide dental care, and poor people in the county did not really have a place to go to get quality dental care. So we started off with one clinic, and [00:35:00] five dentists, and ten dental assistants, and over the years we've expanded that program to where we had -- at one point we had nine clinics, I had over 25 dentists, and we saw in excess of 70,000 patient visits per year.

JI: Wow.

MP: So we had re-- we really had expanded access to dental care for poor people in Harris County, and we're still -- we're still doing that, as well, today.

JI: That's excellent.

MP: That is where my public health degree -- that's where my public health degree came into play. And as part of that program, as part of that program that we still run, we have been able to concentrate on the true problematic subpopulations of the poor. Who are they? They're the patients with diabetes, with an A1C of greater than 10. They have -- they have serious dental issues. We have a subprogram that treats diabetic patients. We try to get 'em in, make sure we give 'em good preventative services, and treat their periodontal disease in an effort to try to save as many teeth as possible. We also have a program for

pregnant women, and pregnant women have difficulty accessing dental care. There are a lot of dentists who are apprehensive about treating pregnant women. We see pregnant women and we do the same thing: we provide comprehensive care for them. We surely give them a lot of oral hygiene counseling, and treat their pregnancy-related issues, dental issues as they go through their pregnancy. And also we have a program that treats -- we provide dental care for patients with cancer. Again, that's another population that has difficulty finding quality, complete dental care, and we provide that population with dental services. Now, all of our patients are -- all of the patients that we see are patients of Harris County Hospital District, so they refer the patients to us and we provide the dental services.

JJ: Excellent. So any... (laughs) Acknowledging, again, that this is so much work, and so much going on. I looked -- so I did a little research into you online, and I saw, I think -- are you a member of the NAACP in Texas? Am I correct?

MP: I was on the N-- I was on the NAA...? (phone cutting out)

JJ: Hello?

MP: I'm a life member, but I'm no longer active.

JI: Oh, OK. Yeah, I just wondered if there was any other, you know, any other groups or activism that you were involved with back home --

MP: Oh.

JI: -- after school.

MP: Yes. Let's see here. I am a... I'm the president of a school board, Varnett Public School's. That's a charter school here in Houston. I'm the President of that School Board. I am President of the Harris County Hospital District Foundation. The purpose of that foundation is to raise money for the Harris County Hospital District, to help the District provide services to patients that are not paid for by the taxpayers. Over the years, the Foundation has provided \$45 million, I guess, in funds to the District for those purposes. I'm a member of the Board of Directors of Prosperity Bank, which is a regional -- a regional bank here in Houston. And I also serve on -- as an advisory member to the DeBakey High School for Health Professions. That is -- we -- in Houston, we have magnet schools, and this is a magnet [00:40:00] school that trains -- that prepares students for health careers. It's affiliated with the Baylor College of Medicine, and I'm on that advisory board.

JI: Wow. So you're still very busy. (laughs)

MP: I'm still... (laughter)

JI: And it's all -- and that's not to belittle all of the things. That's so many excellent organizations and schools, and, you know, there's a lot of service there. And, again, I just want to acknowledge how much service you've done, you know, [moved to?] the community, and it sounds like to Texas as a whole. That's just really wonderful, so... (laughs) So we're sort of heading toward the end of this interview, and I usually have one last question, which is, you know, is there anything that we haven't talked about yet, any story or memory you have of your time at Harvard, or after, that you think is important for us to know about you?

MP: Well, I... Well, I think Harvard has provided me with an excellent academic background. The teaching and the intellectual stimulation that you get at Harvard is compared to none. I mean, it's really -- it's really amazing. And I think, also, that Harvard has an obligation, a responsibility, to continue making -- continue to have that educational experience shared by other black and brown students who are out there in America somewhere, who are interested in going to dental school. I think -- I think Harvard has an obligation to continue the diversity program in the years to come. If... We are the

-- we are Harvard's ambassadors out here in the real world, and the -- and most of us, at least the ones that I'm still in contact with, are very grateful for the experiences that we've received at Harvard, and we are making a contribution to our communities, whether it is in the academic area or the private practice area, and in my case it's -- it has been a little bit of both -- I mean, all three: academic, private practice, and community service. And the Harvard name still carries a lot of weight. And Harvard needs to continue to provide -- to provide the educational opportunities that we had 50 years ago.

JJ: Excellent. Well, I don't have any other questions for you. I just want to take a moment to thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me today, and to tell me about your history, and to tell your story. I just -- I really appreciate it. Thank you.

MP: No, thank you for asking me. I hope -- I hope it's worthwhile.

JJ: It was ex-- incredibly. It was very excellent. I'm going to turn off the recording now.

END OF AUDIO FILE