

Oral History Transcript

John Broesamle Suddenly a Giant: A History of CSUN Collection

Interviewee Michelle Cooper = MC

Interviewed by John Broesamle = JB

Interview conducted on June 16, 1991 at an unspecified location

Transcribed by: Danielle Snali

Edited by: Philip Walsh

Time: 01:13:13

Biographical Note:

Michelle Cooper was born in Detroit, Michigan and was raised by her mother in a single parent household. She initially attended Eastern Michigan State, but left the university in 1983 to marry and move to Germany with her husband. When she and her husband returned to the United States in 1984, Cooper moved to Los Angeles, where she first worked as a technical writer and then attended California State University, Northridge. She graduated in 1991 with a B.A. in English. She also served as a university ambassador, Director of the Racial Awareness Committee, and President of Associated Students.

Interview Transcription

Tape 1, side A

JB: All right, Michelle, we are now on tape. What I want to do is to begin where I began with your counterpart from 1956, '57, Ben Rude, and ask you a little bit about your background. Tell me a bit about your background if you will.

MC: That's a very broad question

JB: Well, you can respond to it any way you'd like. Um, I think you came from out-of-state?

MC: Oh, so you are interested in my—my family background and—and my hometown?

JB: Whatever the tale you'd like to go into it.

MC: Um, well, I'm originally born, raised in Detroit, Michigan. Uh, I have one brother, and I was raised in a single-parent home. My parents divorced when I was two, and I was raised by a wonderful mom, very committed to her children. I graduated high school in nineteen eighty-one from Cass Tech Un—Cass Tech High School, which is a college prep school for students who are college-bound in the city of Detroit. You actually have to get in through an application process and maintain a certain academic standard to remain in the high school.

JB: You were college-bound all away along then.

MC: Uh. Let's just say that in my family, the college-track skipped a generation. My mother's parents were not college-educated, but their siblings were. My mother's mother has a sister who was college educated at Eastern Michigan University, which is where I also attended for a year, my aunt Mary and she studied in the area of teaching. So she taught for a while in the city of Detroit and then she got involved with Parks and Recreation. She also wrote a lot of different submittals to the Detroit Free Press, which were published in the early thirties. My grandmother did not attend college; she married at eighteen. She married my grandfather. She was kind of bitter about the college experience because she had to do so much to support my aunt in college by checking out library books, to take them up to Eastern—you have to understand the distance between Ypsilanti and Detroit, which is a great distance. And I would imagine then even greater it would seem even a greater distance then. And she also had to exchange clothing with her on weekends and different things like that. So she decided that she had her college experience with her sister, so she married my grandfather at eighteen, it was kind of a May/December marriage. My grandfather was about thirty-five, thirty-eight, something like when they were married and my grandmother was eighteen. My grandfather was the oldest – I believe five, one brother and four sisters. And his father died at a very young age in the South; he was born in Alabama—by the way, my grandmother was also, she was born in Detroit. Her mother migrated from I believe Missouri. And my grandfather was born in Alabama with five—four sisters and one brother. They were all college-educated, but my grandfather, I think, left school in the eighth-grade because he had to take on the responsibility of the family when his father died. And one thing that his father made sure was that the boys all had a trade and knew how to take care of themselves and the family. So my grandfather had that ultimate responsibility to make sure his sisters got through his school and his younger brother. His sisters were teachers in the South and I don't know what my Uncle Albert did, though. I didn't know him too well. All I know is that my grandfather and Uncle Albert were great fishermen and they used to love to fish together in the Great Lakes. So I would say that generation of siblings did attend higher education. But then when you got to my mother's generation, at least with her father's children, only my aunt went to college. My mother's sister, young sister, went to college, and she was brilliant. She graduated from Wayne State University. But outside of that, my other aunts and uncles actually all work for either the city, county, or federal government. My mother actually works for the IRS, Internal Revenue Service. Her cousins, however, are college graduates. As a matter of fact, the author of *Black Rage*, which was the—

(00:05:00)

JB: Grier and Cobbs?

MC: Yeah. Grier is my cousin, that's my mother's first cousin.

JB: Is that right?

MC: As a matter of fact, I just spent last Thursday with him. I took my brother down to visit him. He is one of the siblings of one of my grandfather's sisters, who was a teacher in the South, F.A.(??) Grier. As a matter of fact, she just died at ninety last November.

JB: For years, I assigned that book to my freshmen and sophomores.

MC: Yeah. Actually, I brought him to the campus in February. He spoke February 20th. There's a cover—front-page article in The Sundial when he was here. He talked about public policy and the need to change public policy. That's the future he sees for us as young people to really address changing public policy because of the design of public policy and the exclusion of public policy as a stance today because so many of our city charters and state policies and federal policies were established at a time when we weren't as diverse as we are and didn't have as many immigrants and the make-up of society was so different, so that was something he talked about, but that's sidetracking. So that and my mother has other first-cousins who are doing very positive things, you know in other parts of the country. But again, it skipped a generation with my grandfather's children and now my cousins, we all went to college. Myself and my cousin, Randy, we're the first to actually finish our college degrees. My brother actually has two years of undergraduate experience, but now he is in the army. He was here for graduation. He plans to complete his term in the Army in November and then go back to school and finish up but he'll work while he's going to school because he is a year older than I am. And my cousin, Cynthia, went to Wayne Stat—Western University in Michigan but she did not finish though. So that's kind of—I guess you can say I was college-bound in the sense that certainly college wasn't foreign to my family, but my mother was not college-educated; she is now. She finished her degree at San Bernardino—Cal State San Bernardino. She quit her job at the IRS in '89 and went back to school, finished up in '90. And no—actually, she went back in '88 finished up in '89 and then—no, it was '89, because this is '90. And then in '91, she moved back to Detroit, now she's in a graduate program at Wayne State University and she went back to the IRS. I just heard that last week.

JB: Had you perceived(??) her out here when you came out to California?

MC: Yeah, I came here in '84.

JB: What brought you out?

MC: (laughs) Well, that's when you get really into my past. Actually, when I was at Eastern [Michigan University], I met a guy that I fell in love with who actually went to my high school, but I didn't know him in high school. And we met in college and he had been in the country for two years by then. He was raised in Europe and he came here to the [United] States to finish high school and then went to college. And we ended up in a relationship and he left the country for about a year and came back and wanted me to leave with him. And so I left school, and I moved to Germany for a year and I worked at

a golf course over there and I was a wife with my husband, and we were there for a year. It was a honeymoon for a year, and we came back and we realized we were both too young to be responsible in a marriage because we had agreed when we came back to college—I mean back to the country we would go back to school. And that was the route I took, but he didn't and he seemed to be a little confused. So I felt at that time—this is a kind of painful experience—but I felt at that time that I had to move on. So I left the marriage and I went home, and that was in '84. I was married in '83, separated in '84, about a year and two months later. And I stayed with my mom for about two months and I realized that, you know, my mother told me, "You're an adult now, you know? You're married; you know, you're responsible for you," and "What about school? I need help, you know?" "Well, look, you're a married woman." Wow, that was shocking for me; I was twenty-one. So I decided that I didn't feel supported and I was very hurt. Now I understand why she did what she did, but I didn't then. And everywhere I turned, I would run into him because in Detroit, I mean, certain circles are small, and everyone kind of knows each other. So if I didn't run into him, I would run into someone who had just seen him. And I was trying to go to school but it was impossible, so I left. I was also looking for a cultural mix, so when I left the city, I wanted to go someplace where there was a cultural mix because I had really enjoyed living in Europe and traveling to different countries and meeting so many different, diverse people. And I came to California. I had a friend who was studying at UCLA and she was living with about four other students. And they invited me to come stay with them, so I stayed with them for three months and then I moved out on my own. I went to UCLA Extension for a semester, and I didn't even finish the class; I took Economics, didn't even finish. And I realized that I had a big responsibility taking care of myself. So I went to work for Living Mutual Insurance Company and as a claims representative. That's where my history in insurance began and I went from property damage to life insurance. I went to Executive Life; I worked there for a year and I did(?) something different. So I ended up with a software, writing documents was Cyber Tech Computer Products, and they actually wrote software packages for life insurance companies and that's how I got the job because of my life insurance background. So I took a job as a documentations specialist or a technical writer, and that's what I kind of did until I came back to school for about three years.

(00:11:42)

JB: What brought you to CSUN specifically?

MC: Well, I had heard about CSUN, and I was working in a computer company and I was—it didn't dawn on me I had been writing since I was about eight, doing poetry. I mean, I—I, my mother actually has some stuff I had written when I was like eight years old. I mean, I remember a song I wrote, "Popcorn Love," when I was about nine. But I never really tuned into my writing. I just thought it was something I did for fun, just like a person plays an instrument for fun. So when I was working in Cyber Tech, I focused more on the business end of it, being interested in information systems, becoming a systems

analyst and those things because I was working in a computer company. And I knew I didn't want to go into the engineering or computer science end of it because I had already studied engineering at Eastern [Michigan State]. My major was chemical engineering at the time, and I knew that wasn't what I wanted to do. So I thought, information systems, it's more of a business area and it deals more with management of systems. So I looked into the business school at Northridge because it has such a great reputation, even nationally. So I began looking at the Information Systems program that they had in the Business School. And I thought, Wow, you know, this isn't, you know, bad program and Northridge, you know, sounds like a good school. I had never seen the campus, and I attend First African Methodist Episcopal Church, First AME, Cecil Murray is the pastor there. And there are a lot of professional people there, both educators, attorneys, doctors, and I happen to be in touch with some educators because of my church, I was teaching youths the Bible and also the history of the church. And, so, I was working with, uh, Ralph Dawson, because we used to do these leadership workshops in church and they're called "Lock-ins." As a matter of fact, I'm doing one June twenty-eighth. And they teach children values. And Ralph Dawson, who is in the Health Science Department—I mean, not Health Science but the Health Center dealing with Black-on-Black crime at Cal State L.A. Uh, as a member of my church, and I was working with him on these Lock-ins, and I just started talking to him and he was asking me about me because the church never really knew what I did or who was I. They knew I worked with the kids and I had done a lot with the kids but they never knew anything about what I did in my personal life. So he finally started asking and I told him. And I told him, I said really, I always have this feeling like—I can tell people what I do, but I always have to tell them that I want to go back to school because that's important to me. So I just told him, "I really want to back to school." And says, "Do you?" He says, "Well, have you thought about what school you want to go to?" I said, "Well, I thought about UCLA, and I've thought about Cal State Northridge," and I told him the area I was interested in. And he says, "Well, UCLA is going to be a tough one because it is so impacted, blah-blah-blah." And then I thought—I said, "Yeah, it's so large and it seems so impersonal because I went there for an extension class." And he says, "Well, if you're interested in Cal State Northridge, I'll put you in touch with someone and we'll get you into Cal State Northridge." So I said, "Okay." So he introduced me to Bill Huling(?), who I called for weeks (laughs). And, finally, I got in touch with him. He didn't know me from Anita, they say Adam. So—

(00:15:18)

(JB laughs)

MC: I introduced myself and told him that Dr. Dawson had—had me contact him and we talked and he suggested that I speak to Peter Holmes because Peter Holmes was working in Institutional Relations, which is connected to Academic Services. So I contacted Peter Holmes, and that—the rest was history. We coordinated; we talked. I came in and met with Peter and we got my application in and went through process and then I came into

Northridge; and that was in the Fall of 1988. And, at that time, I think that all happened within a two month or three month period. And my job was in shock. (Both laugh; unintelligible noise) "Where are you going?" "Back to school," you know? And I just did it, you know? And that's kind of the way I've done things in my life, anyway; just do it, you know?

JB: You've just graduated...

MC: Mm-hm.

JB: With a major in Business and a concentration or a—

MC: No, my major is not Business. My major's English.

JB: English?

MC: I didn't finish the story, but go ahead with your (unintelligible).

JB: No, please, finish the story.

MC: Well I'll briefly, uh, tell you what happened when I came to Northridge. Because, remember, I said the emphasis was in Business because that's all I knew, working in the corporate arena—

JB: Sure.

MC: —and that kind of thing. And I never really focused on my writing. And what happened was, working as a technical writer, I discovered that I really enjoyed writing. And I really enjoyed communicating and it was great to go and work with the programmers and ask them questions about, you know, the systems they were putting together, you know, the transaction because we were basically writing user manuals and programming manuals, which would be user manuals for programmers. And so we had to make sure that we were describing the transactions well so that someone can use these manuals and actually work the system. And I enjoyed that a lot more than I enjoyed the transactions themselves, but I really enjoyed having the responsibility of making sure that someone could understand how to use this system. So I really got into the writing, and I loved it. And I said, "This is strange." I really don't—in the mean-time, I'm still taking Advanced COBOL (JB laughs) and other computer, you know, programming courses, you know? And doing well, but, uh, not really into that. So I came to Northridge and, oh, after I left Cyber Tech, actually, I went to another company, Life Co(??) Travel Management, and I started writing sales proposals, commercial sales proposals and government sales proposals and they were selling life insurance. I mean, I'm sorry, uh, travel management packages to corporations. And so when I went there, I said, "Wow, here I am writing again, in a completely different area, about a completely different

subject, completely different things. And I said, "I think I like to write." So when I came to Northridge, I decided because I've always read the newspaper and stayed updated on current events and things like that. So I decided to major in Journalism and English, so I came in as a double major in English and Journalism. And I got an internship with UPI, and it was a grand experience. I—they gave me some stories in L.A. (JB laughs) And I met some really—I mean, I even had the opportunity to interview Mayor Bradley; I mean, it was great. And but I discovered in that experience that I didn't like journalism; I didn't want to be a reporter. My reason for being a reporter was, because I said, "You know, there's such a poor image of minorities in the media, and I'd really like to—the best way to change that is not complain about it but go become a journalist. I'm a minority and I can write, you know, the truth, that kind of thing. I never really had an opportunity to really cover any stories about minorities but I discovered that in the stories I was covering that I would give a story, and after the editor finished with it, it was—I'm like wait a minute, that wasn't the emphasis that I had in the story. And I just didn't like not having that control over my work. So I stuck with English and went into the writing option and on the side(??) I actually get very involved in creative writing and I'm especially interested in narrative writing. But my professional focus, of course, is law school and eventually public service or politics. And I don't know if I'll go the judicial route or some other route, but right now I'm really eyeing the jud—judicial. So that's kind of how it goes full circle. So, I mean, there are so many things boiling inside that, uh, I have to, uh, (MC laughs) achieve or look into at least and attempt to do. But my—I think my, my major focus now is-is, uh, public service. I really want to help people.

(00:20:17)

JB: This is an extraordinarily complex story and very interesting. You decided to run for President of Associate Students. What led you to that decision?

MC: Well (MC laughs) I can give you the short version or slightly longer version.

JB: All right. Whichever version you think is more appropriate. You know what I'm doing?

MC: Yeah.

JB: And, uh, it sounds as though the slightly longer version might be—I know our time is constrained but, uh, you tell me the version you think is the, uh, more appropriate one for the story I'm trying to tell.

MC: Okay. I was working as a University Ambassador here at the University, giving tours of the campus and I ran into Dr. Fred Strache. And he came up to me and said, "You know, I think you're going to get a Ph.D. one day." And I looked, I'm like who is this strange guy telling me I'm going to get a Ph.D.? You know, I don't—I don't know this person. And I said, "Well, I'm Michelle Cooper. You are?" And he introduced himself and told me his position. And I said, "Wow," I said, "Well thanks for those encouraging words because I

had never thought about getting a Ph.D. one day.” And my sights we—had been at a minimal level. And from there I said, “Well are there...” I told him what I did on campus and he suggested me getting involved in some other things, so I did. And—and I got involved in the Orientation Program, the Freshmen Orientation Program. And that led to my involvement in Associated Students. I met Dave Stiver, who was going to become the President of the following year. He was my immediate predecessor and I met him during orientation and I guess Dr. Strache had talked to him about me possibly getting involved with Associated Students. And they had an open Senate seat and when seats come open of course the AS [Associated Students] President and the Senate would appoint to fill that Senate Seat. And so I was appointed to a lower division seat at the time. And that was my first experience with Associated Students. Well in the meantime, I had already accepted a position as a Director of the Racial Awareness Committee, which is now called the Cultural Awareness committee. And I had had the opportunity to get involved with Lillian Roybal Rose and some other awareness programs for the campus and just my own personal development. Well, I’m telling the story of both at the same time because they kind of complement each other. As senator, I had an opportunity to become introduced to the clubs and organizations on campus, meet more students, and really find out what it meant to be involved in the student, community on campus. I sponsored several budgets and I also took a chair position with the University Affairs Committee. Well, that’s where I started meeting the different administrators and—and faculty on campus because I had to coordinate the issues, coordinate with them regarding the issues we were dealing with included lighting on campus, the bike path, academic issues and different things like that. And anyway, the year moved on and I started to like what I was doing. So I ran in the fall election to feel better about being elected into the Senate rather than just being appointed. So I was elected into an Upper Division Senate seat in the Fall of '89 I believe. And, so, so into the Spring Semester I had to resign my position as Chair of University Affairs because I just didn’t have the time to maintain my position as Director of Racial Awareness. So when I resigned from that position, they started opening up the process for running for President for the next year; that was spring of '90. And when I was Director of Racial Awareness, there was a member of the committee who I won’t mention, who we are very good friends now, but he said to me, because I was getting a lot of coverage for the Racial Awareness Committee from The Sundial. And he said, he goes, “Oh Michelle, everything you’re doing, you’re doing for political reasons, anyway.” And I was shocked because I really didn’t understand politics at that time. I was an English major just involved in student politics and learning about it, really, at that time. And when he said that to me, the humanitarian that he thought I was (both laugh). And I said, “Oh, really?” So when election time came and everyone saying, “You should run for President,” I said, “No, because I’m not doing anything that I’m doing for political reasons. I am doing it for my heart; I will not run for President.” So it wasn’t a planned thing, and what happened was there was a young man, Britten Appoly(?) who was a young man, he was older than me, Britten Appoly(?) who was a graduate student and he had been a Graduate Senator the first semester I served. And he came up to me at Academic Services where I worked; I had been working for a couple of years for Dr.



Jacobs, and he came to my office and he goes, "Michelle," he goes, "Why aren't you getting on the ballot?" And I told him the story of what happened and I said, "You know, it's just not worth it. I'd rather just serve." He said, "Well, Michelle, don't you think if you really want to serve, that if you can get a position of President, that you can serve so much better than you could do right now, if you really want to make a difference?" And I said, "Yeah, but, you know, that's a political position." And he goes, "You don't know. You could be political in that position, or you can serve in that position. And it's really up to you. And you have to understand in anything that you do, people are going to criticize you. And you're going to hear more criticism and people telling you things that don't feel good than you're going to hear pats on the back—you know, or you're going to receive pats on the back or compliments. He said, "You should get used if you really want to serve because anytime you try to do something good, people are going to talk about you, even if you, you know, if you do something bad, you know, that really stands out, but even if you're not, they're going to criticize." So, I said, "Okay." And it was funny because that same day—I do pray and that same day, I had thought about the presidency. I—I—I had prayed about it that morning, and I said, "Well, God, you know, what should I do? What do you want me to do? Should I run for this position or not?" And sure enough later on that day, Brit came into my office and what was so funny about that to me was—or so strange—was I had not seen Brit in about four months. And here comes out of the blue with this. So I put myself on the ticket, paid my fee, and decided to run with Arturo.

(00:27:35)

JB: It was, would you call it, a slate?

MC: We weren't a slate; we actually ran as a ticket. But there were two other slates, yeah.

JB: Fine. What did you stand for? What were your positions?

MC: Well, coming out of the Academic Services area, I was very concerned about retention. You see the numbers and you really see the numbers for minorities when you're in I mean, they don't really—when you're in Academic Services, you really see the numbers for minorities. And being African American, I couldn't help but be sensitive to the fact that, you know, I think in five years we had had like a graduation rate of .02 percent, or something like that. And I was like, "Oh, my God." It was either .2 or .02 [percent] but for some reason .02 [percent] keeps coming to my mind. Well, anyway, when I saw those devastating figures and not that I'm competitive with other minorities or any other group, but when I saw that the Latino graduation rate was much better and the Asian was of course much, much better. And the enrollment of these students was higher, you know. The percentage of Asians was higher in enrollment. The percentage of Latinos was higher in enrollment in the University. And I saw these terrible graduation rates of minorities—I mean, of Blacks. I said, "This is awful," you know. And I said, "We really need to do something about retaining the few African Americans that we have on

this campus.” And then I ran into this woman and I can’t remember her name; I think her name was Christina, white woman who was in my department. And most of the students I knew in my department were white students because there are very few blacks in the English Department. So most of my friends or peers in English, of course, were white students. And what happened was I started talking about this minority problem of retention and, you know, there’s problem with retention with minorities and I was just upset. So then Christina started talking to me one day about a problem she was having in school. Basically, she was on academic probation, and she had been on academic probation before and she was afraid she was going to be kicked out for good. Then I started talking to other white students and I saw a student in the bookstore. This guy, I couldn’t believe it—jock. (MC laughs) Oh, I’m sorry for the word “jock.” I mean that’s not good but he was that type. He goes, yeah, he goes, “I have a one-point seven [GPA], but that’s all right. I have a job set up, and as long as I, you know, graduate and get this degree, my old man is going to set me up, so I’m not concerned.” I said, “One point seven.” And I went back to Dr. Jacobs and I said, “Dr. Jacobs,” I said, “This is not just a problem with minorities. This is a problem throughout the campus!” I said, “Students don’t care about their grade-point averages. They don’t care about what they’re learning in the institution, and students aren’t graduating. They’re on academic probation throughout all cultures on this campus, and this is a problem. And those were mine—that is when my issue with was really a focus on retention and getting students to graduate. And not only that, but academic excellence and getting students to be (unidentifiable sound). Oh, I’m sorry.

[END OF TRACK 1]