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## **Nina Harris Memoir**

### **Harris, Nina**

Interview and memoir  
digital audio file, 34 min., 13 pp.

UIS Alumni Sage Society

Harris discusses her experiences at Sangamon State University, earning her undergraduate degree in 1988 and completing a master's in public administration when it became the University of Illinois Springfield. She recalls the excellent and caring community-minded professors and particularly recalls classes with Professor Tim Miller.

Interview by Bruce Strom, 2010

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Narrator: Nina Harris  
Date: April 15, 2010  
Place: Springfield, Illinois  
Interviewer: Bruce Strom

Begin Recording

Q. Today is April 15, 2010. I am Bruce Strom doing the interviewing, and the narrator, the individual being interviewed is Nina Harris with the Springfield Urban League. Nina, prior to attending Sangamon State University, what kind of education did you have prior to that?

A. Prior to attending Sangamon State, I attended Lincoln Land Community College and secured an associate's degree in business and that was my education I upon graduating immediately from high school. Formal education... the pursuit of formal education was something that our parents very much required and while that was my interest as well.

I am from a large family; I have five other siblings. My mother was a homemaker and my father a firefighter for the City of Springfield. And so as a result and I am the second oldest, the oldest girl and as a result of having a brother who was finalizing his formal educational studies and my having three other siblings in the home or four other siblings in the home after me, I knew or I believed that to do my part, this was something that I should pay for myself. And so I opted to secure full time employment, and I put myself through school by working full time and taking classes in the evening. But again, prior to that my education was an associate's degree in business from Lincoln Land.

Q. Ok. Did you... well your home was here in Springfield. You grew up here in Springfield.

A. Uh-huh, yes I'm a Springfield native.

Q. Because I think many people who come to Springfield or work in Springfield have come here from other locations and then they've gone to school out at the university as well.

A. Uh-huh. Right and I find that very interesting that there seems to be an increasing trend of individuals from major metropolitan cities, you know, Chicago and then other metropolitan cities across the country that they are opting for the smaller university setting.

Q. Well I think they are and maybe that's because now, you know, the degrees that it offers and so forth, it's a four-year program, so I think that probably has opened the door a little more for people to commit to coming here.

A. Uh-huh.

Q. Well what were your goals? I think you touched on it a little bit, but what were your goals as far as, you know, completing some form of education? Did you have something in mind?

A. I absolutely... excuse me... I absolutely had goals in mind. I knew my strong suits were mathematics and science and so I knew absolutely a goal was to acquire a baccalaureate degree. And I could not decide definitively upon a major once departing from Lincoln Land but I knew I wanted to secure a four-year degree. And so my goal was just very general, just a degree of some type again thinking that I perhaps would pursue a degree in finance, a four-year degree in finance or accounting. That ended up not being the case.

Q. Yes, yes. And what generally was the time frame that you were attending school here? Or I should say, at UIS.

A. At UIS, let's see... the time frame would have been... Let's see, I graduated in 1985 from Springfield High School and enrolled in Lincoln Land immediately in 1985. And so I would have been done studied at Sangamon State in 1988.

Q. Ok, so you got right to it?

A. Oh, yes, definitely.

Q. And then you had a master's degree as well as the bachelor's degree at out Sangamon State?

A. Yes. Well, yes the bachelor's degree was when it was Sangamon State and the Master's at UIS.

Q. Yes, the name change.

A. Yes, yes. The master's once it became UIS and I secured a master's degree in public administration.

Q. Ok. What were your impressions particularly in the early years but anytime while you were enrolled out there, what was your impression of classes and the campus that you were attending.

A. I was very much impressed for my first visit to the university as well as subsequent visits while taking classes. I was very much impressed with the college campus in that indeed it reminded me of a college campus in a major metropolitan city but smaller buildings. Of course today it certainly reflects that type of atmosphere, a large college campus atmosphere. But I was very impressed of course by the esthetics and extremely impressed by the professors there and their dedication.

And given that it's a smaller university, I think that's one of its benefits. One of its benefits, I felt a greater sense of community from among the professors as well as from the students and I think that was motivated and encouraged by the professors. I just, I began to feel more... I

began to feel more vested in this community and I just felt, you know, a sense of community out at the university.

Q. The professors or the instructors at the university obviously made a positive impression with you. Were there any in particular that sort of stand out or were they just generally pretty good?

A. Absolutely. One that stands out in my mind is Professor Tim Miller and he was a professor in the management field of study. And Professor Miller was very, very knowledgeable. I think he has since retired. But he was very, very knowledgeable and extremely supportive of the students. I can recall from... I took three classes with Professor Miller over the years, but from the first class he and I would engage in conversations about current events and world-wide events that were tangential to what we were discussing in class. It directly correlated to what we were discussing in class.

And he, Professor Miller, would often share with me his social tithing efforts. He would give back to the community; he would often administer training sessions on various topics for different not for profit organizations. He would train their staff person, and I just remember being extremely struck with that. Here's a man with tenure who is very, very busy, but he always made it a point to give back. And he had even with all of that he had enough time to take a vested interest in me. And he was one of the first persons to plant the seed within me that I should consider a graduate degree. He strongly suggested it.

Q. Uh-huh. He recognized some talent and he let you know about it.

A. Yes, he did. Yes, he did. He certainly did.

Q. Well I think, you know, just my own thoughts about it was that in the early days particularly when I came from the early 1970s and into the 1980s, the university sort of had a reputation for being very liberal, very social conscious, you know. I was not at the university in the late 1980s and during the 1990s. I did my work there before then, but... so I don't know if they still had that sort of philosophy or behavior with the faculty. What was your impression?

A. My impression was that again a lot of the instructors, a lot of the professors, they were community minded whether or not they were a product of this particular community. But because of some reason, perhaps because of the culture of the university, they ascribed to a community mind set.

During the classroom instruction, the book instruction, and our on hands experience, they would often several... I can particularly recall several would often make references to, give examples of ways by which our education would benefit our careers and the examples they used were real live as it related to the Springfield community, Springfield being the capitol city and how that might benefit us if we stayed here in Springfield and then also how it would benefit us if we relocate.

I don't recall... I think I had a mixture of liberal and conservative instructors and professors. But again just that community theme that they would reference, you know being in the capitol city and government being one of the largest employers and what that means and again examples, real life examples of how the book instruction, the classroom instruction played into living in a capitol city and what that meant for the masses, you know, for the masses and what that meant for elite... I remember... elites as well. I remember one of the professors in the management program signing a book, elite deviant and, you know, we talked about Springfield.

Q. Well going back to the roots of the university, I believe that public affairs and community participation was part of the culture that was intended in its beginning and maybe what you witnessed was part of that.

A. Probably. That's interesting.

Q. Another thought about if you will about the culture or at least the environment of the university was class size.

A. Yes.

Q. How do you think that the... what was your impression about class size and about how that may have affected what transpired while you were there?

A. I think that the class sizes were smaller in comparison to what I had witnessed on other larger college campuses. Whenever I would go and visit friends, high school friends who were away at school, the class sizes were smaller. And I think that that very factor was certainly beneficial to the students because it allowed us more of an opportunity to develop stronger relations with the instructors and with the professors.

Q. Uh-huh.

A. So I certainly think that the class sizes were very beneficial.

Q. Ok. Were there any other professors either good or bad that made an impression on you (laughter)? You know sometimes professors have a reputation for sort of scaring the pants off so to speak, so I don't know if you had any of those.

A. Yeah, I had some of those (laughter). I recall one, I won't call him by name; he had a pony tail.

Q. Uh-huh.

A. I remember him. Yeah, he kind of scared... it was during my master's pursuit and he... I think his bark was bigger than his bite and he was so funny because he... talk about community, we,

of course, had to prepare master's thesis projects. And based upon our work experience, he had a very clear understanding of what he thought each individual's thesis topic should be (laughter). It was the darnedest thing. He and I went back and forth... As a matter of fact, I recall thinking I worked here at the time because my affiliation with the Springfield Urban League began as a board member.

I worked for the State of Illinois, the Department of Financial Institutions and served as a board member and then was asked to consider employment. And he was just very enamored by the fact that I worked here and thought that my topic should have something to do with human services. And I said, "You know, I work there. That's something I cover daily, so I have an interest in another area." But boy, we went back and forth on that, so yeah. But the majority of the instructors were just very, very supportive and not that he wasn't but the majority were very supportive.

Q. In the early years and I'm just... maybe when you were going at the late 1980s, may e construed a little differently as not... maybe mid years but in any case, did you have much awareness of campus activities and did you participate in any campus activities while you were a student?

A. You know in all honesty I didn't have much of an awareness of campus activities and did not participate much. And I think, you know, some of that was a factor of my not actually researching what some of the opportunities may have been. And that was because I worked full time and during the latter part of my undergraduate degree, I was married when I was twenty-two and so, you know, I was married, no children but married and so I had other priorities.

Q. Uh-huh.

A. And so I wasn't as active on the campus as maybe others.

Q. Well I think that's probably a common theme for people who went to school out there when they were working. They were already adults.

A. Uh-huh.

Q. With a work life and possibly a family.

A. Uh-huh.

Q. Where they had other responsibilities, so...

A. Uh-huh.

Q. Now the university had classrooms out on the campus there, but they also had some classrooms downtown. Did you have experience at both or just at the main campus?

A. Just at the main campus.

Q. At the main campus. You weren't aware that.

A. Right.

Q. You know I think that... I don't know if you remember or know this, but I think they had classrooms in the Leland, the old Leland Hotel building on the corner of... I think the Commerce Commission is in there now, but it's on Capitol and Fifth Street, I think.

A. You know what, I've seen... You know what I recall that when I visited downtown for meetings, I recall seeing... You know I didn't realize UIS has a campus here downtown. That's interesting.

Q. So... well from your days as a student out there and meeting people and sharing your classes and your instructors, are there any that you've stayed in touch with and that you maintain any kind of relationships with anybody, either students, other students or faculty that you are in contact with?

A. Absolutely. Again I believe that one of the premiere benefits of the UIS student is the fact that so many students... again that sense of community so many students begin to ascribe to that sense of community and because there is the smaller class size, it yields a greater opportunity for interaction and so there are several individuals with whom I still maintain contact. There are also individuals who I met over the years that I'll run into and, you know we'll recall our days at UIS but certainly, definitely.

Q. While you were a student there and meeting these people, did you ever interact with them socially? You know, not just in the classroom but maybe go out for a beverage or a sandwich or do anything like that with any of the others.

A. Now that I did not do because my job again was so demanding and I would... with my job I would have to attend dinners, you know, and presentations and I sat on boards and so my evenings were pretty, pretty full. So unfortunately no, I did not do that, unless... I take that back as I think about it, unless we scheduled a study session.

Q. Uh-huh.

A. We were working on a group project or then we would do so during the course of completing, finalizing our project.

Q. Outside the classroom?

A. Yes. Yes because during my undergrad experience, there was a lot of group work.

Q. I don't know if there still doing this while you were attending school, but at one time the university had a program of enrollment for students that you could either go on grading basis or go on a pass/fail basis. I don't know if that was still happening when you were there.

Q. Uh-huh.

A. I know in the 1970s, it seemed like that was the option of... most students wanted to go with the pass/fail rather than the grading structure. Were there any things like that or the attire, say for the classroom, the formality or the lack of formality, I mean were there things like this that come to mind?

Q. Absolutely. I do recall once being inquisitive, wondering about the pass/fail option but I never requested that option. I've always received grades and I wondered why the difference. With that pass/fail option I can recall some professors or instructors talking about that with students during class time. And I wondered why the difference but didn't ever take the time to research that. But I definitely remember that those options were available more so than in my undergraduate years than my formal, in my graduate years.

And the attire was certainly different than one would see in a traditional large campus setting. I think that a lot of the students at UIS during the time at which I was there would attend class immediately following the work day, so there was a lot of business attire, yeah. Now there was a mixture, but before of course the university became or started to enroll undergrads, yeah you would see a lot of individuals who were dressed professionally.

Q. Well I think some people came from not the immediate Springfield area, but the surrounding area which meant that they were possibly traveling like you say at the end of the work day before they went home and so they didn't really have an opportunity to change their clothes.

A. Absolutely right.

Q. What... again in the classroom the sort of presentation methodology of the instructors, did you see that as being sort of very structured formal or was this sort of a casual, more conversational... you know, how did you see that, the behavior within the presentation of the material in class?

A. During my undergraduate years, I recall the majority of the class presentations being a bit more informal. There was a lot I recall a lot of group work in the management field, a lot and therefore, there was...

Q. Uh-huh. Role playing.

A. Oh yes, role playing, absolutely so that the environment was very much, so very much casual. And then during the graduate years I recall the instruction being more formal, more about the... the book knowledge in which students were participating. Now of course we would discuss, in different classes we would equate the book, what we've learned, you know, in reading the material to everyday life.

But I remember it being more structured, even professors more now that I think about it. It seems as if the graduate years, those professors were more business oriented, now while still personable, not as much as the undergraduate instructors and professors. There seemed to be a lot of talk about tenure, too during the graduate years.

Q. Getting a little more formal in the whole...

A. Absolutely, absolutely.

Q. Well that's interesting. I wonder, just a question for myself. And that is, I wonder if that was the outcome of the university moving to a more traditional kind of a setting or whether that was changing from undergraduate to graduate, maybe the instructors have sort of a different behavior.

A. That is a great question. It would be interesting to find out. That would be something.

Q. So your classes didn't really meet off campus. I mean, apparently sometimes the instructor or groups would meet somewhere other than being on campus, find some favorite watering hole and sort of hold class there.

A. Absolutely.

Q. Were you aware of any of that kind of stuff?

A. Let's see, I'm trying to recall if we ever had... I don't recall.

Q. Ok.

A. I don't recall, yeah.

Q. Now since you've graduate and going on with your life and work and family and all of that, do you have occasion to be... or have you had occasion to visit the university? And if so, in what regard and how often?

A. Yes, I visit the university often when attending meetings at the university. I serve on the Chancellor's Advisory Committee. And also my husband and son and I, we frequent the auditorium productions... we frequent the auditorium productions and then other meetings

and when the Springfield Urban League has partnered with the university in administering different programs and services to campus students.

For example, we partnered with a division of the university... the Springfield Urban League partnered with a division of the university to administer a college student oriented health fair, and so I went to that. And then I've been invited back to the university to support its programs such as the MISS... oh what is that? MIS, Minority Students Teachers – it's a teaching preparation program when they are close to their graduations. But yes, I frequent and then there is of course a lot of community organizations that will utilize the space at the university to host various events, and so I do get out there quite often.

Q. How often per month or per year would you say you get out there?

A. Probably per year I would, I frequent, I'm probably visiting the university... I know more than five but less than twelve times, yes.

Q. Well I'm kind of getting near the end of this and any time you want to add to what, you know the topics for discussion, that's fine. One of the important questions is, "What value has your education provided to you?" I mean what has been the outcome for you? Has it been the value you received? And if so, how?

A. My education has provided just immense value. I often perceive myself having made the decision to... my initial decision was to reside in Springfield just initially for the first two years and then to transfer to a larger college campus. I love metropolitan cities and so I always thought I would like to try life in a major metropolitan city. But then when I married and my husband is a... just loves Springfield and the smaller community, we resided here, but I've always... I've often shared with college students, I just met with a UIS student whom I am mentoring last week, that I believe that I received the best of both worlds staying here in Springfield attending particularly UIS, the university.

And I say that because I was afforded an opportunity to garner very real, very substantive formal education while being able to work full time and while being supported by intelligent, capable professors with a sense of community, and it has benefited me immensely. I often recall on those days in real life work experiences both early on and as I have progressed professionally, so there has been very, very real benefit in terms of financial benefit having the college, the formal education.

Q. The credentials.

A. Yes, absolutely. Having the credentials and again coupled with the real life work experience, so I believe I received the best of both worlds and I don't think that it... I honestly do not think that the way my life, my career has unfolded probably wouldn't have occurred if I had pursued a larger campus and attended school full time. I just do not believe so. It could have, but I don't believe that to be the case.

Q. You could be off in Chicago or San Francisco or who knows, in Denver, who knows.

A. Exactly, exactly. Isn't that the truth, and I would like to add that when I... there was a time period where I had not visited the campus once it joined the University of Illinois, once it became a member of the University of Illinois system and I was bowled over by the look of the campus and how it changed and how it modernized and I was just... it still blows my mind when I go and it's just, just the evolution of the campus is just unbelievable. It feels like it happened very, very quickly. And I know things happened over time but again, it's just... when I think of the campus here, it's just a smaller version of the campus, you know, in Chicago or Champaign.

Q. It's developed a lot of character.

A. Oh my goodness.

Q. I know myself when I was out, when I went out there in the 1970s, it was all cornfields. There was nothing, there was no landscaping, there were very few buildings. And you'd go out there and you'd feel like you standing in the middle of no place.

A. Exactly, exactly. Isn't that... I recall that.

Q. There's a wind blowing...

A. Exactly, I remember bundling up, yes, yes. Now there are dorms and the whole nine yards.

Q. Well, the coursework that you took and the degree areas that you had, did they apply to your work life, I mean, specifically or was it a matter that you just had the credentials, you demonstrated your intellectual abilities, and so that helped move you along. Or is it a coursework that actually helped you or that you applied? I shouldn't say that but that you actually applied in your work life.

A. I, you know when I... again I have always... one of my strong suits has been mathematics. But one of the reasons why I decided not to pursue the degree in accounting is, you know I talked to some accountants and they shared with me their careers and their feelings about those careers and whether they had any regrets, etc. And because of my real life work experience, I decided to pursue a baccalaureate in management and then subsequently the master's in public administration.

Again based on what, you know the research and the talking to people and very much I drew upon the lessons learned and the philosophies and that academic, that strong academic foundation to help strengthen the organization, very much so when I was with the State of Illinois, I did so as well as here within the Urban League I did so. So very much I utilized that... that book knowledge that, that academic instruction utilized it to assist me in my various positions.

Q. I can see, you know, given management and public administration, I mean it fits right on to where you are.

A. It does, it does. Isn't that something?

Q. Yeah.

A. Yeah, like it is some master strategy, had it all planned out.

Q. All those courses, I mean a lot of those courses I should say had a lot to do with how do you work with people, how do you organize, how do you get other people to get things done.

A. Absolutely, absolutely, absolutely.

Q. Well I think the questions that I had here to help us guide us in this conversation I'm finished with, but I want to open the door to and invite you to say or share with us anything at all that might be different or special about the university and in your memories about what took place while you were going to school. Is there anything?

A. There is. In addition to some of the things that I've already mentioned, UIS has also been extremely blessed to have some outstanding chancellors in the leadership positions, just outstanding; individuals who most certainly display and displayed a vested interest in the university as well as in the community. I've always been impressed by the contributions, the selfless contributions of the current chancellor as well as the leaders of the past, you know when it was Sangamon State and now that it is the University of Illinois at Springfield.

And in addition to that the students benefit not only in my opinion from the instructors and from the professors and from the chancellors, but there are other individuals in crucial administrative positions that from my experience would illustrate just their very strong support, which you wouldn't see everywhere in students from... oh what was the man's name? He passed of cancer; he was at when it was Sangamon State. What was his name?

Q. I can't remember either.

A. Of course, ok, it'll come to me later. I can see his face; he was a very tall gentleman. But there were different administrators and currently Ed Wojcicki, I think he is just a stand-up person who again may not only support the students but the community at large. Again that sense of community can't be beat.

And I can recall Ed Wojcicki when we, the Urban League brought to town Soledad O'Brien last year. And Ed Wojcicki, I telephoned him and invited him to identify and select journalism students to participate. And he, I think he was more excited about the opportunity than the students themselves. Of course they were very appreciative, the students were, but he just

thought it was the best thing. I mean he really, he got right on it and we had a table full of journalism, aspiring journalists who were able to have one on one dialogue with Ms. O'Brien.

Q. Well, Nina, thank you very much for taking the time to share with us your experiences, your recollections of the university.

A. Well thank you, thank you. It was great talking to you and to hear your perspective.

34 minutes 43 seconds

End of Interview