**Gar Russell and Thembi Anne Jackson**

Friends and colleagues Gar Russell and Thembi Anne Jackson discuss their experiences as campus staff at Berkeley Law. Gar describes some of the changes he’s witnessed on campus over the 30-plus years he’s worked at the law school. Thembi worked in other departments at the university before joining the law school in 2016.

**Thembi:** The law school is basically a universe in and of itself. So even though we're on campus, the law school is very much its own entity. And that's what I discovered very quickly. When I was in economics, I was very much a part of the campus and I felt that. But coming here to the law school, it's kind of very exclusive in that way.

**Gar:** Yes.

**Thembi:** It also feels different just in terms of the hierarchy, it almost feels more corporate here than it does in other areas. And it feels more formal here than in other areas where I feel more comfortable wearing my jeans and a backpack. I also came here to the law school at a pretty volatile time after the dean had left.

**Gar:** Yeah, you came at a time of great flux.

**Thembi:** Yes, indeed.

**Gar:** We're talking about what I called the tumult, dealing with former Dean Sujit Choudhry, the sexual harassment issue with our mutual colleague who's no longer here. I was here the first time we had a dean who had to step down for sexual harassment, this one involving a student. That was in 2002 and the dean was John Dwyer. I felt the second time was worse. It kind of touches again upon the hierarchy that you're talking about. See, the school was a lot smaller when I started here in '89. The Dwyer thing happen after the expansion, but we still had vestiges of our small-town mentality. This time was a little different. The way Dean Choudhry ran things, he was very hierarchical himself. And so hearing you say that is a complete contrast to the memories I have of old, old days. Yes, there was absolutely hierarchy here and there's faculty and there's staff and the twain shall never meet, in some respects.

**Thembi:** Right, right.

**Gar:** But at the same time, we were all up under each other. So we kind of had to gather. There was an institution known as the Message Center—this was before voicemail. So phone calls went to this central place. And the Message Center was sort of the kitchen. It was where you got your faxes, it was where you got your messages, it was where you got your mail. The student handouts were put in sort of a lobby area outside the Message Center. So it's sort of this focal point where you chatted with the faculty, where you chatted with each other and, you know, you talked about your kids. That all disappeared after the building moved and the faculty got divided between Simon Hall and North Edition. So we didn't see a lot of each other. Whereas before, our offices were fairly close to each other. So all that kind of dividing up the school only emphasized the hierarchy bit because then you're not really seeing each other, hanging out in the kitchen, you don't necessarily encounter people. You kind of get siloed.

**Thembi:** Yeah, it sounds like a kind of attributed to a greater isolation, maybe particularly around staff, too.

**Gar:** Exactly. That's one of the things that can happen when you grow because the school exhibited a lot of growth over the past 30 years. So the Choudhry thing brought up a lot of issues for people about how staff are treated. A colleague of ours made a very pointed statement, I think, saying how much we were bullied. And that was really the first time that that type of conversation was held. You know, it's unfortunate, obviously, that it happened—

**Thembi:** But it's kind of good that at least there's this positive that comes out of it because grievances and issues and challenges are shared really for the first time since you've been here, which is a long span. So for you to witness this and then see all of these changes kind of unfold out of this negative situation is pretty interesting, actually.

**Gar:** It is.

**Thembi:** And I wasn't even aware of that. So you really have seen a lot of changes over time.

**Gar:** Yeah.

**Thembi:** You know, I remember Prop 209. We've got that sign right behind you, 20 years of 209. And maybe you could talk a little bit about how that unfolded here and what it felt like and what the landscape was like.

**Gar:** Well, there was a sizable African-American presence. It was a sizable Latinx presence, sizable Asian presence, fairly active queer student community. So in those pre-209 days, they were putting on fascinating programs. I remember the La Raza law students put on excellent conferences every year in the 90s. It was a really big deal. 209 kind of closed the door on a lot of things and enrollment of students of color plummeted. Most famously, the law school had one African-American student the first year after Prop 209.

**Thembi:** Wow.

**Gar:** It was just kind of stunning. So when 209 passed, I think it was Channel 2 News was roaming the building looking for a faculty to interview. They couldn't find anybody, so they talked to me.

**Thembi:** Nice! I think that's very fitting, frankly.

**Gar:** Well, yeah. One story that I remember that they included in that bit—my mother went to UCLA in the 40s. She graduated like, second in her class in English.

**Thembi:** That is wonderful. I did not know that.

**Gar:** Yeah, she saw some things.

**Thembi:** Oh, I know she did.

**Gar:** So the thing I said was that she told me the story of how when she was an undergraduate, a professor said to her, well, Miss McVey—that was her maiden name—you know, you did A work in my class, but you're a negress, so I have to give you a B. And she had no recourse. And so I was saying, are we going back to that? To where no matter what you do, no matter who you are, you got into this prestigious institution, it's all gonna come basically down to your skin color. And that's what it felt like. Now we've had a black president come and go, and we still aren't exactly post-racial. We're nowhere near.

**Thembi:** That's just silly. I think what we see is we see the pendulum swing back and forth. So once we think we've made some progress, then you see a backlash.

**Gar:** Yes. You know what helps bring the pendulum back this way, to where we are now because now we're growing our African-American student population and Latinx student population? I seriously think it was the deanship of Christopher Edley, who was our dean for about nine years. Again, representation matters. Hello? Having a black man as a dean. First off, there were never that many black men on the faculty at all. There were two black men on the faculty when I first started here. And then I think that was it until Chris was hired as dean. So having somebody in that position here, suddenly we started getting more applications from students of color. And I'm really happy to see how it is now. I mean, it's not as high as it was 30 years ago, but we're moving in the right direction.

**Thembi**: Yes. It's great that our numbers are growing for students and it's a priority. I also want to see our numbers grow for staff, in terms of diversity, and for faculty.

**Gar:** That's exactly right.

**Thembi:** You know, in coming to the law school, one thing I noticed is that in terms of any kind of management positions, you've been carrying that role as a person of color, specifically African-American, who's in a leadership position. And then I'm also kind of carrying that torch. And so sometimes when I have struggles here and challenges and I think about leaving, I think about that. And I think about how important it is for me to actually be here in this role.

**Gar:** It is. When I first started working here back in '89, the custodial staff at that time was mostly African-American. Today, it's more Latino. One of the custodians came up to me and said, "We know who you are. We see you." That was huge.

**Thembi:** So even if we don't feel it ourselves, we're actually role models.

**Gar:** We are. Having you here—

**Thembi:** And having you here—

**Gar:** It's important because then people look at you.

**Thembi:** Absolutely.