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Lee Bailey, a Commitment to Graduation, and Phi Delta Psi

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WMU Alum Lee Bailey

Wednesday, Feb. 8 at 5:00 PM

Virtual Meeting via Zoom

Cassie: Okay, so I'm recording now, so go ahead, whenever you're ready, with introducing yourself.

Lee: Okay, my name is Lee Bailey and that's spelled L-E-E B (as in Bob)-A-I-L-E-Y. And I attended Western Michigan University from 1978 to 1982. I have my undergrad in business administration, and I have a double minor in economics and marketing.

And I also had some really fond memories of the East Campus. East Campus to me, was always the area that was serious. For a business person in accounting with an accounting major, you could take classes all over WMU, but when you walked up the hill, which is what we called it, and you walked up the steps, by the time you got to the top, first of all, you're a little winded, and then you have to go to your class...

And so you always made sure that if you had a test or something of that nature, that you got up to the heel early so you could sort of relax, get your bearing. And so when you went to class on East Campus, you knew that you were really in academia, you were learning, you were trying to find out what you were gonna do for your career. But at the same time, it made you really feel collegiate.

It was almost like a part of Western and within Western, and everyone who was in business had a little camaraderie associated with it. So I think also it was like when you really want to study, you go to the library on East Campus. It was like less distractions. On the weekends, if you just wanted to have some activities away from the normal gym activity, you could go to the East Campus gym and you could rent it out.



We often rented the gym out for different fundraisers. When I say we, I was a member of the first African American fraternity that started at Western. Their name is Phi Delta Psi Fraternity, Incorporated. And we did fundraisers. We did the Cancer National smoke out every year, we presented movies on campus.

And, really, the business acronyms that we learned (a lot of us were in business) helped us with the different activities and things of that nature that we put on. But getting back to East Campus per se, it was sort of like a haven for all business individuals. And it was a special place because it had its own little aura of almost like for lack of better terms, it made you feel like you were in Ivy League when you hit Western.

Cassie: Right, yes, right. And I wanna go back a little bit to when you first arrived on campus. So are you from the Kalamazoo area? What made you choose Western in the first place?

Lee: Well, actually, I went to Cast Tech High School in Detroit, Michigan, and when I was looking at schools to attend, one of the ones that was aggressive in pursuing me was Western.

They actually sent a recruiter out to our high school. I had never really heard of Western before then. And then they had scheduled different activities where you could sort of get used to the environment. They had some trips where you could take to come up to campus early and just get an idea what the school was like.

They also had a program called the MLK program, which was really active in recruiting minorities. And it's called the Martin Luther King Program. And the Martin Luther King Program, I didn't have to go through it because academically I was okay. I didn't have to get that extra assistance.

But a lot of my friends did and they are on to some amazing careers. That program gave a lot of individuals from the urban environment a time to go back and sort of relax and get to more of a rural environment. Now, Kalamazoo has come up and gotten much bigger since then.

Cassie: Right.

Lee: But it was like we would leave the city. It could be Chicago, it could be Detroit, wherever. And you'd get to Western and you almost took a relief breath and said, okay. It was really a good... you felt safe and you felt comfortable and you felt like you were with a group of administrators and faculty that really supported you. If you wanted to do well and work hard, there were people that would help you.

Like on East Campus, one of the best things that I ever figured out was going to office hours. Going to office hours, you got to know your profs. They would really give you overviews on subject matters that were more geared towards the exams that you might wanna take. They wouldn't tell you what's going to be on it, but it would definitely give you a good outline to use. And then you started to understand your professors. And then I think if you were doing an essay and had an essay question, you sort of knew the writing style that they would want you to try to express.

And those writing styles actually are some of the writing styles I still use here in business. I'm currently the Vice President of Lending for the Wall Lake Schools Federal Credit Union. And I've been in lending now for over 40 years and I've held positions, General Manager. But this is probably my highest one right now, being the Vice President.

And when you think about that, I was a person that came to Western, didn't have very many means, financial aid and student loans was what I used to pay for my undergrad. And it was the perfect launching pad. And the reason this really attracted me was I really wanted to say that, you know what, the mission that Western had to get young men that didn't have the same means to go to college and give them an opportunity and hopefully they turn into productive citizens and be a contributor to your community, I hope I achieved that goal for them, because it really made a difference in having that opportunity and having that financial aid that enabled me to go to school because my family didn't have the means to do so.

And because of all of that, I was able to progress and have my career move on. And it was a good support base. It always has been for me. And I'm an alumni. I hold Western very dear to my heart. My wife, she's a University of Michigan grad, and all the women like to marry Western men.

That's another thing. We're good catchers. (Both laugh) She's a big Wolverine fan, and I'm as big a Western fan. And so it was just something that the efforts that the university made to come and help individuals become successful and to give them an opportunity, it was just amazing. And I'm telling you, a lot of my friends, roommates, colleagues that we had together right now, they're very successful. And we all came in under a similar program that Western offered us, and I hope they continue to do so.

Cassie: Yeah and then moving forward a little bit to now you're on campus and you're a student at WMU finally, what are some of your earliest memories being on campus and getting adjusted to undergrad life, student life.

Lee: It was really hard for me. I didn't come up to a school with very many friends. It's so interesting because my daughter and my son, when they went to school, they met their roommates before they even hit campus. They had different socials they went to, they had Facebook accounts and all that kind of stuff, but for me it was literally like the only people I knew were people that went to my high school, that went to Western, and we hadn't coordinated, we just found each other walking around campus.

So when I first got to Western I felt very alone, I met my roommate, but you had to meet new people, but it was almost like we were all in the same ball of wax, which was sort of the good part about it, because you were all freshmen and there were programs that were set up at school so that freshmen could get acclimated.

And then the other part I really remember is I did enjoy having my own dorm room with one roommate and I did love the cafeteria because it was all the food you could eat except for weekends. And I really got in great shape because I lived in Valley 2 and you had to walk all the way up to the main campus every day and all the way back, and I was also on the track team so I had track practice after school, after you finish your classes. And so it was always a big deal, finishing track practice and trying to get back to the dorm before it closed.

So those are some of my early memories when I first hit campus. The other thing that was really interesting is that I ended up having a student type of work study program and so I was working in the sociology department, and so I got to meet some other faculty members that way.

I remember one time just feeling really sad so I called home, I was like, I don't know if this is working out for me, and it was really interesting, I expected my mother to say, "Well, if it's not working out, try harder and give it more time." But she was like, "Well, okay, I'll send your brothers up and they'll come and get you." I was like, "Well, let me think about it a little longer!" (Both laugh) I wasn't expecting that.

Cassie: She was ready for you to come home, yeah.

Lee: Right. I guess the other part is, from a social perspective, Western had the best parties, it was so much fun. And once you got into the social side of things plus your school, it became a very special environment where you felt accepted, you felt welcomed, and you had friends. And a lot of those friends that I made in college are my very best friends at this point in time, more so than any high school friends that I've ever had.

Cassie: Right. And you said too that you were a part of a fraternity, the first African American Black fraternity on campus.

Lee: Yes, yes.

Cassie: Was that when it was just starting out then, or was... had it been around a few years?

Lee: Actually, the fraternity started in 1977, I pledged in 1978.

Cassie: Wow.

Lee: And it was actually founded on Western's campus by Western students and it's still in existence today. And we actually have a plaque saying that they're founded here at Western Michigan University.

Cassie: Wow. Yeah. And so what was that like, joining the fraternity? Do you have any memories with that, especially getting into a very new fraternity?

Lee: Yeah, I do. At the point when I pledged I didn't know it was really new, it was similar to everyone else that I went to, they called them their invitation, and so the framework was very similar.

Cassie: Yeah.

Lee: But the thing that was really interesting and the reason that I decided to pledge to Phi Delta Psi Fraternity Incorporated was because they had an emphasis on graduating. The mission of the fraternity was to make sure that you had every type of tool available to make it through a journey in an unfamiliar environment to be successful, and it was really something that really helped because when you lost your focus, you'd also have guys that would say, now "You can't go to that party, didn't you say you have a test tomorrow."

It was always little things like that that kept you moving and growing. And then you also had your other friends that would be in your different groups that you go to the library with. But being in a new fraternity I think the other thing that, because a lot of us were in business, so we learned the parliamentary procedure, Robert's Rules of Orders was the way we conducted our meetings, and all of those things helped us when we went to the business world because we were used to being in meetings.

It wasn't unusual to us on how to handle ourselves in a formal environment, so it was a great stepping stone, it was a great learning tool and again, you made some of your best friends. We put on projects for the campus, like I talked about, the Great American Smokeout, we had movies that we put on.

All of those were things where you had to actually do marketing, you had to have your budget for the event then you had to advertise to students because students would come, and that's how you made your money for your chapter to invest and do other, when I say invest, I mean put into other projects, and it just went on for year after year after year.

Cassie: Okay, so we've talked a little bit about some of your extracurricular activities at this point and I'm wondering now, going back to classes a little bit, where were most of your classes and what do you remember about the buildings that they were in?

Lee: Yeah, most of my classes were actually in the business school which was the first when you walked up the hill, it was the one right directly in front of you.

Cassie: Yeah.

Lee: I think I looked at it, it was building number five, I believe it might be called. The school of business, and that was where I took almost all of my business classes which were accounting and finance, information systems, and the thing I really liked about it was that it gave you that old Ivy League feel. Everything hadn't been updated but you had like your

Sangren Hall and those kind of areas were very modern, new, but Western and East Campus and the business school sort of had that Harry Potter mystique to it.

Cassie: Yeah, yeah.

Lee: And so it gave you a different type, like I said, it made you feel special, as far as I'm really here focusing on the things that are going to be important for you to be successful, so I always liked that atmosphere. Some people were hoping it was more modern but I migrated to and enjoyed that environment.

Cassie: And do you remember anything about any of the professors or other faculty during your undergrad?

Lee: Yeah, I remember a lot about, as I said, we would socialize sometime outside of class and they'd have like their student hours where you'd meet at a restaurant or Bilbo's something like that and you'd have pizza and just talk about class and what the goal was.

We had one teacher, I wish I could remember my professor's names rather, but one was Mr. Monzel, I want to say it was, he's an accounting teacher and he was very instrumental because he had a humor about him but at the same time he was very technical, but he always made you feel that it was nothing wrong with being open and asking a question and saying something about like if you didn't understand a subject matter.

And he would make statements and say, "If you really wanna make a lot of money in life, get your CPA and be a lawyer. Then you'll really make a lot of money!" He'd say witty stuff like that. So as you were thinking about it, he would also give you just different career things to think about while you were there.

Information systems. I really enjoyed that because... I'm getting ready to so date myself now... We actually did Fortran where you actually would go in, do the cards, you had to punch them to write a program, and you literally had to do your flowchart, if this, then that. And it was one of the best things that ever happened to me from a professional perspective to this day, because whenever I problem solve, I almost do it from a flowchart perspective.

I go in and I say, okay, like in my management class, it taught me, okay, what are your five steps to solving a problem? First, identify a problem. Have you identified a problem? Come up with possible solutions, select some options, then implement and then follow up. Those five things, as simple as they are, are some of the most complex things, but they are really sort of the foundation of being successful in business.

When you talk about accounting, I didn't become a CPA. I'm in lending because I like being with people more and helping them with different financial structures. But the thing that my accounting taught me was I understand financial statements, I understand the accounting cycle. I'm able to relate and see and ask the right questions when I'm looking at new projects so that I get the proper answers to make sure if we're gonna invest money, if we're gonna lend money, that we do it and understand what we're getting involved with.

Cassie: Yeah, and I just had a few more questions for you since we are coming to the end of our times shortly. I wanted to ask... you mentioned this a little bit, and you also mentioned Bilbos and such. I was wondering when you did have free time and your busy schedule, what did you do with it? Where did you hang out? Around Kalamazoo or on campus?

Lee: I hung out a lot on campus. Mainly, I would be at the student union on the main campus or I'd be right outside the library on east campus. Since I was living in the valley most of the time, you had the pond that was over there where you had your ducks and things like that, where you would socialize.

But I would say mainly it would have been at the student union a lot. We used to go when I was at Western, one of the sort of subcultures ended up being this soap opera called Young and the Restless. And it came on about 01:00, and we would literally arrange our schedule so you could meet at the student union to go and watch. And I mean, it would be jam packed. At 01:00, everybody watched the Young and the Restless. (Both laugh) It was so cool. I can't take this class. It's at 01:00. Yeah, give me the one at 2:30.

Cassie: My gosh. I wonder what happened in all those classes. The professors didn't have enough students in the 01:00.

Lee: Right, they probably just started moving them. Okay, we're not having one at 01:00 anymore. I hung out there. The other place I'd hang out a lot was at the gym. I played racquetball, and I love playing racquetball. I was in the racquetball intramural league. We played intramural basketball. You'd have dorm against dorm sometimes that they would organize, and then they had different teams that you could join.

And the other part was, with my fraternity, we had a lot of activities that we would socialize in. We planned different events and things of that nature. We'd hang out off campus sometime in Norwood and places like that. When we got older, like when you sort of migrated, as you became more of a junior, more of a senior, you hung out off campus a lot more. So you started really living the off campus life where you were hanging out at the pool. You thought you were pretty cool.

Cassie: Right. (Both laugh) And do you have any recollections about athletic events or any events at WMU that stick out in your mind during your time there?

Lee: Yeah, we had some really good competitions in football, especially when we played Central. That was always a big, exciting game and the best party of the year. And so you'd have a lot of your friends that would come up from Central and you'd hang out, you'd go to the game, and so that was always a fun weekend. We had one year where the basketball team was pretty good, and so it started getting a pretty good following.

But, really the athletic teams were sort of marginal at best when I was there. But I did run track, and so I loved the different track meets and things of that nature. We had a really nice... at that time, it was a new field house, pretty much, that had a really nice track where you could really, when you ran certain tracks, don't have what we call bounds. But Western

had a nice new track when you ran under your legs or just pop up. So you really could run some really fast times indoors.

Cassie: Yeah. And moving on to a harder question. Answer it however you'd like. What do you think impacted you the most during your time at WMU? Whether it be a person, a place, or something that happened.

Lee: I think the thing that probably impacted me the most was I realized that if I was gonna be successful, I had to apply myself to do it. It's not gonna be a professor, it's not gonna be a teacher.

Nobody's gonna give you any grades if you're gonna get this diploma, you're gonna have to buckle down, really apply yourself, and use all the tools that are available for you to be successful. So I think that, at my time at Western, it made me realize, I guess I'll grow up to say, if you're gonna be successful anytime you're gonna be successful, you have to really apply yourself.

And understand that it's gonna take effort, it's gonna take discipline in order for you to be successful. And I think it wasn't forced down your throat, but at the same time, it was like, well, you know what? This is what's required. This is what's necessary. It's more than just getting a grade.

And then right around my junior year, a lot of stuff changed. I went from getting C's to getting A's in my classes. And the reason why was because my freshman and sophomore year, I was going to school just to get grades. Just to sort of yeah, let me sort of get by. My junior and senior year, I realized I had to learn something so I could apply when I graduated.

Cassie: Yeah, right.

Lee: So it went from being just like a class to being your profession. Well, you really gotta know what you're tryna do. I gotta get this, because this is gonna be what I need to use to be competitive in my next stage of my life. And so it was one of those things where, I guess because of the individuals that you were with, as far as, like, your friends, everybody just started to mature, and the fun became less as far as hanging out and doing things of that nature. And the actual work of becoming an educated person started to kick in. That was one of the things, the other thing I think that was really important is that my friends that I had met, we sort of all made a commitment to graduate. And we realized that if we were gonna graduate, we had to totally apply ourselves because we had seen a lot of people come to Western and leave.

By your junior year, they would flunk out or they would leave for whatever reasons and that was something that you're, okay, then what are you gonna do if that happens? So, that experience of Western, I guess to summarize, it gave me a chance to be naive. It gave me a chance to grow and gave me a chance to mature both physically and mentally.

Cassie: Yeah, and I wanted to ask, how do you feel about WMU now versus when you were a student there in your undergrad? How has that perspective changed?

Lee: The only thing that's happened is I think my perspective has become more appreciative of Western. One thing that Western always had was a desire to be a well-rounded, integrated community, have a lot of individuals that come from a lot of different backgrounds and say, you know what? This is gonna be the real world, the microcosm of this real world, you're gonna understand that the people who you used to know, now you got to know some other people, the cultures you used to know, now you got to know some other people. And then I continue to see Western evolve, the leadership that they have, they have been multicultural. The religious aspect has been global and because of that, it makes me very proud to be a Bronco because it's the type of institution that I fully embrace.

Cassie: Yeah, that's well put, and now, at the end of our time, I wanted to see were there any other last memories that you'd like to share? Any topics that we didn't touch on maybe that you wanted to talk about or anything that you wanted to end with?

Lee: Maybe just as an emphasis I hope Western continues to reach out to urban societies, urban neighborhoods, to give the Western experience to others that might not be as fortunate. And to be able to attend financially and to continue to be able to put aside resources to help them be able to financially attend the university, because the output will be something that continues to benefit and enhance the image, reputation, and success of our university.

Cassie: Yeah, well, thank you so much for agreeing to talk to me today and taking time out of your day to sit and share some of these memories and stories that you have. I really appreciate it.

Lee: It's been my pleasure, thank you so much. You've been excellent.

Cassie: Thank you, yes, so I will confirm that I have that consent form from you then but then, just so you know, we are hoping to right now, the timeline is looking like all of the stories will be up on the website.

Lee: Okay.

Cassie: And the website will be viewable hopefully sooner rather than later.

Lee: Excellent.

Cassie: And when that is up, I can send you over a link to your email if that works for you.

Lee: Definitely.

Cassie: And you can go and see it. So yours will be up on there as well as about I think there's like 50 or so other stories as well from all different time periods too so...

Lee: That's gonna be so interesting.

Cassie: Yes, yeah, I'm not sure if you were interested in it, but if you were, and you wanted to share a photo of yourself, either a more current one or a photo that you might have from your time at WMU and you wanted to have that included in your story, feel free to email that over to me, and I'd be happy to put that with it.

Lee: I definitely will, I think I'm gonna do it before and after.

Cassie: Yes, great idea, yeah, we've had some pretty cool photos that people have done, sort of in that area as well.

Lee: Right?

Cassie: Yeah, well thank you very much and if you have any questions in the meantime, feel free to reach back out, you have my phone number and my email.

Lee: Thank you so much and you have a great evening.

Cassie: Yes, thank you, you as well, bye.

Lee: Bye.